

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

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Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem

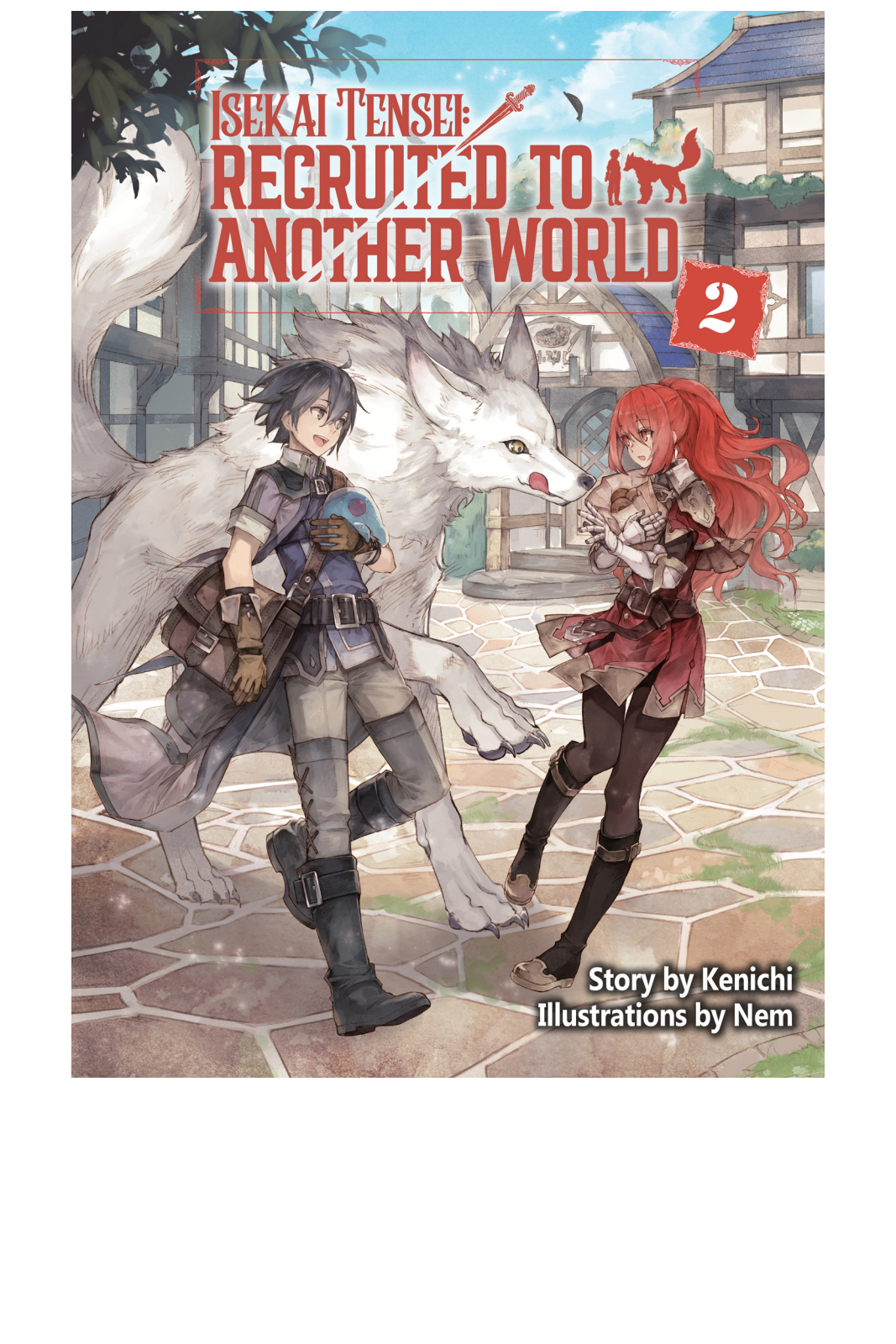




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Prologue

“C-Captain! Ogre! Headed this way!”

“Calm down! First, tell me as much about the ogre as you can, and be specific!” I yelled at my panicked subordinate. After all, just telling me there was an ogre wasn’t very helpful.

“Y-Yes, sir! A caravan just arrived in the city and said they were attacked by two ogres on the road from Gunjo City! Luckily, they left behind some horses and some goods as bait and managed to escape, but...”

“Wait! Did you say *two* ogres? A mated pair?”

“We think so...”

If it was a mated pair of ogres, it was possible they were heading for Gunjo City because it was mating season. Most creatures require more stamina and nutrition during mating season. In other words, they were after more food...in the form of humans.

“And there’s more bad news! It’s possible that both of the ogres...were a *subspecies*!”

What in the world was going on? If it was one regular ogre, I could have bought time all by myself. But if they were both members of a subspecies, even someone like me would get his butt kicked. That was because certain subspecies of ogres were stronger and had higher resistances than ordinary ones. Sometimes they’d even eat their own kind.

“Have the first unit mobilize immediately!”

“The first unit is off on another mission, so they won’t get here that soon.”

“The second unit, then...”

“The second unit is with the first unit. And the third as well...”

So it was just us...which made this impossible. My unit had just been formed a few days ago, so this was too much for them. We’d borrowed a few veterans from another unit, but over half of the unit were rookies. If they tried to fight against an ogre subspecies they’d get completely annihilated. Still...

“I guess we’ve got no choice but to go.” I could see the color drain out of everyone’s faces. I was sure I looked the same way. “I’m not saying we have to defeat them, but we’ll just have to buy time until another unit comes.” I was just about to give the orders to mobilize, when suddenly...

“I have a message!” A separate man rushed in. Had the other units made it in time?

“The ogres have been driven away!”

“Huh?” I blurted out dumbly. Even the veterans looked surprised to hear the news.

“A party of adventurers happened to come across the ogres and defeated both of them! The adventurers’ guild just received the news!”

That was way too fast. It had probably only taken an hour for news of the sighting to get back to me... And they’d been defeated not by another unit, but by a party of adventurers? The strength of adventurers varied wildly, but I’d heard there were some who were so incredible they made the king’s guard look like children. Whoever defeated the ogres must’ve been pretty strong, if not that strong. I was just glad I didn’t end up having to put any of my subordinates’ lives on the line.

A few days after the ogre commotion, rumors started that the party of adventurers was newly formed and made up of rookies, but that died down quickly. It was clear that couldn’t possibly be the case. Plus, there weren’t even any adventurers in Gunjo City who were capable of defeating two subspecies ogres. If they’d been here, they must’ve left right away.

They’d saved the town without bragging about it or asking for any compensation, then left without a trace. I didn’t know who they were, but I felt a deep admiration for them, as well as a desire to repay them.

Chapter Two

Part One

My name is Tenma Otori. I live with my grandpa. I don't have a mom or dad. They died in a car accident when I was three. I don't remember it, though. I only vaguely remember being with them when I was really little.

My dad's dad was the one who took me in.

Grandpa lives in a village where there are no other kids my age. Sometimes somebody's grandkid will come visit, but only for a few days during Obon and New Year's.

Grandpa is friends with everyone who lives by him. They're all very nice to me. Our neighbors across the street and to either side of us come visit Grandpa every day, and they always play with me.

Grandpa's name is Kotetsu Otori. He goes to the mountains with a gun a lot.

Our neighbor on the right is named Kennosuke. I call him Grandpa Ken. He's kind of a strict old guy and he likes to practice swinging his sword in his yard a lot.

Our neighbors on the left are an old man named Shotaro and his wife, Tamao. I call them Grandpa Sho and Grandma Tama. Grandpa Sho likes punching through boards and tying belts around trees in his yard and pulling on them. Grandma Tama makes me really yummy food and bakes yummy snacks too.

The man across the street is called Genzo. I call him Grandpa Gen. Everyone in town calls him a grumpy old man.

Sometimes there are arguments, but everyone is really close, and they're all super nice to me.

They teach me a lot of things in their spare time. Grandpa teaches me judo, Grandpa Ken teaches me kendo, Grandpa Sho teaches me karate, and Grandpa Gen checks my homework and teaches me all kinds of other things.

But most of the time Grandma Tama gets mad at them and tells them they're overdoing it. I don't have any friends my own age in town, but once I started elementary school, I made a friend named Takashi. It takes almost an hour to drive to my school, though, so I can't play with him on weekdays.

I don't have many friends at school, but we play together at recess all the same and I like learning things with Grandpa and my neighbors, so I have a lot of fun in elementary school.



I started getting into trouble as soon as I started junior high

school. From my perspective, all I did was get into one fight. I just happened to be taking on ten guys at once...

The reason I got into the fight was because a kid in my new class started being violent towards Takashi, so I stuck up for him...with my fists.

Then the bully's older brother and a bunch of his friends showed up, so I took 'em all out. Unfortunately I got a little carried away and ended up hurting them.

So then, apparently, the bully's mom came to the school and raised hell about it. I say "apparently" because I wasn't at school that day, but Grandpa and everyone else sure chewed me out over it.

I guess the kid's mom didn't know her son had ganged up on one of the new students at school, but once she found out she came all the way to our house to apologize.

Apparently the reason Grandpa and everyone else was so mad at me was because they thought of me as their apprentice, and because I'd gone too far, but once the kid's mom apologized they all chalked it up to just a scuffle between kids.

At some point I heard from one of the teachers at school that actually, Grandpa and our neighbors were pretty famous. Grandpa was good at grappling-based martial arts, like judo and jiu-jitsu; Grandpa Ken was good at fighting with weapons, like in kendo and kenjutsu; and Grandpa Sho was good at karate and boxing. Apparently they'd all made a name for themselves in their fields, and since I'd learned from a bunch of masters, nobody else my age could touch me.

All three of them were rivals who'd kept training because they didn't want any of the others to be better than them. I thought that sounded like something straight out of a manga.

As for Grandpa Gen, he just laughed and said he wasn't great at fighting, but he had trained his brain instead.

After I caused that problem at school, they added mental training to my list. They made me stand under waterfalls, do sitting Zen meditation, and copy sutras. One weekend they took me up to the mountains, kicked me out of the car, and said, "See you on Monday!" Once Grandma Tama found out about that, though, all four grandpas got in big trouble.

So as you can see, my junior high school experience was far from normal. And since I had to protect myself from all sorts of people looking for a fight, people treated me like I was the leader of a band of delinquents or something. Naturally, I wasn't able to get a girlfriend because of those rumors.



Once I got to high school, I joined a club and got a part-time job,

hung out with my friends and studied, and kept up with my training, which had gotten even *more* intense, so I was always busy.

My schoolwork wasn't difficult, because it was all stuff Grandpa Gen had already taught me. But the other grandpas were going a bit overboard with my training, and sometimes on school vacations they'd make me spar with a hundred people in a row—and not just with karate, but with judo, kendo, randori, and kakari geiko as well. But most of the time the grandpas wouldn't tell me what my opponent specialized in, and so I had to figure it out on my own.

Plus, all my opponents were people the grandpas knew, so they were all incredibly skilled in their fields. They had all participated in national tournaments, and even the weakest of them had won a regional tournament several years running.

It was those beasts I had to spar with. Sometimes they'd switch out every minute, or sometimes they'd just give me pointers. Even though they were really tough, it wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be, and it was a really valuable experience. Although the grandpas liked to call it "sparring with a hundred opponents" because it sounded impressive, I don't think there were ever more than fifty of them. It might have been more accurate to just call it a hundred matches in a row with a time limit and some advice on the side.

Since that's how I spent my youth, I just couldn't get a girlfriend. I asked Takashi for pointers since he'd recently gotten one himself and he said, "Your looks aren't bad, your grades are good, you're a strong athlete, and you can cook, so I wonder why you can't get a girl...? *Ha ha ha!*" It pissed me off a little so I poked him in the head with the corner of my textbook.

Takashi's advice was totally worthless. I asked his girlfriend Miki about it, and she told me the surprising reason—apparently it was because of the grandpas and their friends!

Sometimes I'd see them on the way to school and say hello to them, and for some reason that made everyone think I was involved with the yakuza. And since some of the grandpas were humble, they'd speak politely to me or even bow to me, so the rumors were that I was actually the son or grandson of a yakuza boss... And of course, I had no idea any of this was going on.

All of the grandpas except for Grandpa Gen looked pretty tough, which only helped fuel the rumors.



I managed to get into a college on a recommendation. Takashi and Miki went to the same school as me, but they were jealous because they both had to pass the entrance exam to get in. A tiny part of me felt kinda smug about it, like, "Well, serves you right, being popular

people with actual lives!”

My long-held dream of having a girlfriend finally came true in college, but we broke up after a year. I was depressed. *Really* depressed, and if Takashi and Miki hadn't been there for me I probably would've gone on some brokenhearted solo trip. Like to Aokigahara. But just for sightseeing, of course.

Thanks to the advice of my friends, I was able to take just enough credits to give me more time to relax and hang out, so I had a pretty fulfilling college experience.

After I graduated, I worked at the town hall of the village where I'd grown up. They told me I was the first person who was raised in the village to work at the town hall in decades. The work wasn't very hard, and I knew everyone already, which made it a pretty easy gig for me.

But about three years after I started working there, I had to go to the city municipal office for work. And on my way home, tragedy struck.

I was going to eat lunch before I went home, and I was crossing the street in this unfamiliar business district when I saw a car speeding towards me. As soon as I saw it I stopped, but there was a little girl next to me who didn't notice, and continued to run out into the street.

I heard the sound of the car's horn blaring and screams all around me. Without thinking, I dashed out and shoved the girl away from the car. Then I lost consciousness.

The next thing I knew, I'd woken up at my own funeral and was floating above my coffin.

Everyone wore mourning clothes and was sobbing. Takashi and Miki were there too. They were married now, and they sat huddled together crying. All my friends from college and my coworkers from the town hall were there, crying as well.

I looked around and saw a middle-aged couple bowing their heads to Gramps. There was a little girl next to them. They apologized to Grandpa over and over again, but he asked them not to. He said it wasn't the little girl's fault, and that I did what anyone else would've done. I'd just had bad luck.

The little girl and her parents offered me incense and then went home. When the little girl offered hers, she thanked me as well. Honestly, I was more shocked at how sad everyone was than the fact that I had died. I'd heard stories of people who were presumed dead but had miraculously come back to life, so I tried to put myself back in my body which was lying in the coffin, but sadly it didn't work the way I'd hoped.

I was trying to figure out what to do next when all of a sudden I

heard a voice from behind me.

“Hello, Tenma Otori. I’ve come to recruit you.”



I had the faint realization that I’d been dreaming—dreaming of my past life. The moment I realized that, it felt like the vivid colors of my dream were suddenly painted over with white. The bright white slowly began to fade, and I heard a woman’s voice soothing me, along with a man’s voice in the background.

My mother Celia was holding me and talking to me softly. And Ricardo, my dad, was peering hesitantly at me as he spoke.

Ahh, I’m so happy.

Even though I knew this was nothing but a dream, I couldn’t help but feel happy. I basked in it, but gradually their faces began to fade away. I felt my consciousness stirring. I was about to wake from my dreams.

No matter how happy I felt here, or how sad, it was only a dream. It wasn’t real.

I knew that, but I wished I could just stay in Mom’s arms for a little while longer as Dad watched over me.

But then I woke up.

Part Two

I woke up staring at the familiar ceiling of the inn. The light was still very faint, so the sun must've just risen.

I sat up. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I roughly wiped them away with the sleeve of my pajamas. Since that fateful day three years ago, I'd had that recurring dream every now and then. No matter how much time passed, I always felt so depressed after that dream.

I stretched up as high as I could, trying to shake off those feelings, and took a few deep breaths. *One, two, three...*

"All right! Today's an important day! I better go wash my face." I changed into my training gear and then left the room. As soon as I walked down the stairs, a man emerged from the kitchen.

"Morning, Dozle."

"Hey, you're early today, Tenma! Mornin'!"

He was the owner of the inn and restaurant I was staying at—the Full Belly Inn. He was a veteran adventurer, but retired ten years ago after he got married. As the name of his inn might have suggested, he was a quite rotund man. But he gave out wonderful advice to newbie adventurers, and was admired by many in town.

After I parted ways with Namitaro, I wandered around for about a year, visiting various cities and villages along the way. I'd come to this city—Gunjo City—about two years ago, and had been staying at the Full Belly Inn ever since.

Gunjo City was in the duchy of Sanga, which was several smaller domains away from the margrave of Haust to the west. Gunjo City had started as a small marketplace, then gradually grew to the size it was today.

"Food's gonna take a bit longer to cook."

"That's okay. I'm gonna go exercise outside first, anyway."

Dozle nodded and then went back into the kitchen. The reception desk, kitchen, and dining room were all on the first floor. The second floor consisted of shared rooms, and the third through fourth floors were all individual rooms. Dozle's house was next door. A one-night stay with two meals was 500G for an individual room, and 300G for a shared room. It was way cheaper than the average inn, plus the food was delicious, so it was a popular place. The dining room was open to nonguests as well. During the day it was a restaurant, but once the sun went down it was more like a tavern. It was pretty well appreciated in these parts for their great food and drinks.

I went outside and headed for the well. I scooped up some water and washed my face. Then I opened up my dimension bag and woke

up Shiromaru and Rocket, who'd been sleeping inside of it.

"Morning, Rocket and Shiromaru!"

"Woof!" Shiromaru barked in response and Rocket jiggled his body. I fed them some dried meat and vegetable scraps for breakfast, then gave them a bowl of water.

Once they'd begun to eat, I took a stick that was about a meter long from my magic bag and started training. I practiced my overhead stance as well as swinging, jabbing, throwing, and sweeping.

After I'd trained for about an hour, my stomach made a loud noise suggesting I get something in it, so I headed back inside. I left Shiromaru and Rocket in the yard.

Once the mistress of the inn saw that I'd come to eat, she brought me a plate just like she did every day.

"Today's breakfast is vegetable soup, bacon, cheese, eggs over easy, and white bread. Make sure you eat every bite!" She put the food down in front of me. Her name was Kanna. She was Dozle's wife and the mistress of the inn—a beautiful, slender woman who was every bit as powerful as an adventurer, with a caring heart to boot. People always called the two of them Beauty and the Beast, and perhaps it was because of Kanna's gentle personality, but I never thought the two of them seemed oddly matched.

"Thanks." I tore off a hunk of the bread and layered it with bacon, cheese, and egg, then took a bite out of it. The bread was a little on the hard side, but much softer than what you'd get at most inns. The biggest issue in this world was food spoiling quickly, so most of the time bread was baked until it was very hard to make it keep longer.

"That looks like a fancy combo." As there weren't many people here today, Dozle came over to chat. "You're up earlier than usual. Any particular reason?" he asked as he sat down across from me.

"Yep—I'm going to get fully registered at the guild today, so I wanted to get there early." You couldn't get fully registered with a guild until you were fifteen, but you could still buy materials and stuff like that from them at a younger age if you had a temporary registration.

The registrations were easy enough to obtain—you just had to pay 500G. They didn't care which adventurers' guild you registered at, but you had to start at the lowest rank and you didn't get any special benefits, like the ability to take on jobs, borrow money, or get shared information.

But if you registered, anyone—even an ordinary child—could buy materials, so there were a lot of people who had temporary registrations. That's why I'd gotten mine three years ago when I'd arrived at my first city.

"Why go to all the trouble at this point?"

“I thought the same thing, but it’s just more convenient to have a full registration.”

There weren’t any rules against hunting monsters with a temporary registration, so if I was about to run out of money I could just hunt a bunch of monsters and sell their parts to live off of. Eventually, I’d done that enough times that I’d become kind of famous around here. And that had also led to a few bouts with trouble.

“Thanks for the meal,” I said, having slurped up my last bit of soup. I stood up and headed outside.

“Are you going to try to get your first job today?” Dozle asked.

“If there’s anything good!” I called back as I went through the door to the garden. “Rocket, Shiromaru! Sorry I took so long. Let’s head to the guild.” I started moving in that direction, and the two of them followed me. Rocket hopped into my bag and Shiromaru trotted up next to me.

There were many people bustling about in the city, but most of them didn’t even blink when they saw Shiromaru. They did when I’d first gotten here, but once they saw the red string and tag around his neck they’d calmed down. That was a symbol that Shiromaru had been Tamed. Some city guards had given this to me, because apparently if Tamers didn’t identify their followers in this way, they had to pay a fee.

The guards handed me a special piece of cloth for Rocket, which was currently stuck to his body. Obviously it was hard to put a collar on a slime, so for monsters like that they provided these pieces of cloth.

It took about ten minutes to reach the guild. Shiromaru and Rocket weren’t allowed in, so they waited outside.

The guild was already packed by the time I arrived, and several people turned to stare at me.

“*Tenmaaaa!*” I heard three voices say in unison. The three girls near the reception desk were the first to notice me.



“Morning, Lily, Nelly, Milly.” The moment I said their names, the three girls’ cat ears twitched and their tails swished. As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, they were felids—cat-type demi-humans. Not only that, but they were sisters and adventurers. They were currently Rank C adventurers and their party consisted of the three of them. Together, they were called the “Wildcat Princesses.” Adventurers had ranks F through SS, and not counting the F ranks which were for temporary registrations, there were seven levels of adventurers. When you got to Rank C, you were considered a full-fledged adventurer.

“You’re going to fully register today, right?”

“Come take a job with us!”

“Yeah, why don’t you just join our party?”

They bombarded me with questions. The combination of Lily, Nelly, and Milly could sometimes be overwhelming.

“That’s right, Lily. If there’s a good one, Nelly. I keep telling you no, Milly,” I answered them in order. They were the first people I’d met when I’d come to this town. It had all started when I was at a spot close to town, gathering ingredients, and came across the three of them being attacked by a couple of ogres. I saved them, and ever since then they’ve been very fond of me. Apparently they were two years older than me, but from my experiences in my past life, I just couldn’t help but think they were younger because of the way they acted. I had a feeling they thought of me like a little brother, though...

Once, I asked them why they liked me so much, and they said they were blown away when a temporary registrant like me defeated two Rank B ogres in an instant. It had intrigued them.

Lily smiled at me, Nelly went to go look at the job postings, and Milly grumbled. They all had similar personalities, but there were differences, of course. At any rate, I never got bored of talking to them.

“All right, guess I’ll go register now,” I said, waving to them. It was a relief to leave the room, since the other male adventurers were glaring daggers at me. The three girls were very cute, and although they weren’t that well endowed, they had a sharp style about them. They were definitely beautiful. They also stood out, since they were almost always together. It was no wonder they were very popular with men.

Meanwhile, I was on the shorter side, and although I was slender I was also pretty muscular. And according to those three, I had a boyish face but was handsome, so I had potential. My “pretty, jet-black hair” was unique so it made me stand out from the crowd, and they said my hair “smelled soft,” whatever that meant. They would constantly follow me around trying to sniff my hair, and every time they did it I

faced death glares from their legions of fans.

I went up to the reception desk and told the clerk why I'd come.

"Okay, go ahead and fill out these registration forms. The processing fee is 1,000G." The clerk handed me three pieces of paper and asked if I needed someone to fill them out for me. I told them I could write so I could do it myself, and started filling out the paperwork. I had to put my name, age, whether I could use magic or not, my followers' classes and names, and if I had a criminal record. If you wrote things that were too far from the truth, you could get arrested right on the spot. They had people who would do a background check on you, so it's not like you could put something that stretched the truth too much.

The third piece of paper consisted of these warnings:

1. In general, you may only accept jobs up to one rank higher than your own. Please endeavor to choose appropriate jobs.
2. Any quarrels between adventurers or jobs taken outside of the guild are your own responsibility.
3. Any failed missions will incur a penalty fee and lead you to be sanctioned. However, exceptions may be made.
4. All efforts should be made not to cause trouble for the guild. There are limits to how much the guild can protect you.
5. Please endeavor to obey the guildmaster or guildmaster's representative.
6. If there's anything you don't understand, please don't hesitate to ask the guild's staff.

There were quite a few guild members who weren't that educated, to say the least, so all these things had to be written out plainly.

I handed my completed forms back to the clerk, and after I'd waited for a while, a staff member brought me my card. I paid for my registration, and then took the card.

"Please go ahead and check the details on your card to make sure it's all correct, because once recorded, they cannot be revised. Also, there is a replacement fee of 3,000G, so please be careful not to lose it."

I checked the card and there were no mistakes on it...apart from one thing. "Excuse me, but this says my rank is D." I pointed to the spot that should've said Rank E.

"That is correct. You defeated several monsters ranked C or above while you were still at Rank F, so it was decided that there was no need for you to start at a novice rank," the clerk said.

I'd certainly lucked out. Normally it took about ten jobs before you could level up, and then you also had to take a guild test before

being allowed to move to the next level. Plus, Rank E adventurers could only access simple jobs. So it was best if I went along with the guild's decision here.

"Thank you." I bowed my head, but they reminded me that the guild does not show favoritism and not to get the wrong idea. I put my card away and left the desk. Lily and her sisters had been watching from afar, and now that I was finished, they came racing over to me.

"Are you done, Tenma?" they asked in unison. I told them I was, and showed them my guild card. All three of them peered at it and then got surprised looks on their faces.

"Wow, you're starting at Rank D?! That's Tenma for you!"

"Hurry up and do a job with us!"

"Join our party! Join our party!"

They started to drag me over to the board where the jobs were posted, but three men stood in our way.

"Lily, forget about that newbie and join up with us!"

"You'll have way more fun. We're definitely stronger than this kid, so you've got nothing to worry about, Nelly."

"Yeah! It'd be too dangerous to go out of your way to protect this rookie, Milly."

Their ulterior motives were obvious in the smiles on their faces. Not to mention, it was pretty rude of them to say those things right in front of me.

"No, thank you!" The three girls turned them down in unison, grabbed my hands, and began to walk past the men.

"Hang on! You should really reconsider!"

"It's safer to join up with someone of your own rank!"

"And we're *really* strong!"

Despite having been rejected, the three guys were really persistent, and now they were starting in on me. They called me disgusting, a worthless kid, a piece of trash who was just tagging along with them to make my life easier, et cetera. They were just running their mouths off, though. The fact that they didn't notice the anger growing in the eyes of the three sisters was a dead giveaway of what their abilities were actually worth.

Also, the fact that they didn't know who I was must have meant they hadn't been in town for long. Everyone else in the guild was looking at them with pity in their eyes.

Not to brag or anything, but it wasn't unusual for me to be engaged like this. No matter what world you were in, if you stood out, there'd always be someone who was jealous of you. This was especially true if you were younger than your bullies.

At this point, the three girls couldn't stand the guys' taunts

anymore.

“Give it a break. We already said no, so you need to take the hint!”

“Even if we put twenty of you together, you *still* wouldn’t be stronger than Tenma!”

“Tenma smells good, while *you* guys are all stinky! Get away from us!”

I decided to pretend like I hadn’t heard that last one.

The men all went red in the face and began to tremble.

Meanwhile, everyone around us laughed. In this business, it was all over for you once people stopped taking you seriously. So long as they stayed in this town, they’d be no more than laughingstocks.

“Let’s go, Tenma,” said Lily, tugging on my hand.

Just then, one of the men raised his voice at her. “You’ve gotta be kidding me! We were *nice* to you! How dare you insult us like that?!” He lunged forward to grab Lily, but got a taste of my special move instead.

“Special move: *Ballcrusher!*” I caught the man off guard with one swift kick. All the other men watching went pale and protected their crotches.

“A-Are you all right?!”

“Hey, that was dirty, you little jerk!” The two other guys grabbed a hold of their friend and glared at me. However, just then, around ten other men stepped between us, surrounding the three guys. I looked closer and realized it was the three sisters’ fan club.

They spoke quietly to the men, who began to tremble at their words. I heard things like:

“You’ve got some guts, trying to get with *those* girls!”

“You’ve violated our club’s rules!”

“Those girls are special!”

Occasionally I caught snippets of pretty malicious curses targeted at me mixed in there too.

Lily and the others thanked their fan club, melting the angry looks on their faces in an instant. It was pretty creepy, actually. I watched as the fan club proceeded to drag the three men outside, and then the girls and I headed over to the bulletin board.

“Did you find something good, Nelly?” I asked, as she was the one who’d gone over earlier to have a look at the jobs.

“There were a couple. How about this one?” She showed us a job posting.

Rank C Job: Defeat dashboards

Several dashboards have been sighted at nightfall around the town’s fields, damaging the crops. Please

get rid of them.

Payment: 5,000G per defeated dashboar.

Dashboars were Rank D monsters that resembled wild boars, but ranged anywhere from one to five meters in length. They usually used charge attacks, and one head-on hit from a dashboar could be fatal.

But their hides and fangs were used for weapons and armor, and their meat was flavorful, so not a lot of materials were wasted when it came to this monster.

“Sounds good. I’ve hunted lots of dashboar before.”

“If you’re in, then I’m in too!”

“Me too!”

Lily and Milly chimed in after me. Nelly grabbed the posting off the board and took it to the reception desk. When she came back she said with a smile, “I made you the leader, so we’ll be counting on you!”

The village that had submitted the job request was several hours away by foot, so we decided to start preparing now and depart tomorrow afternoon. We had a short meeting to plan things out, and then went around town gathering up supplies.

“Let’s see... Potions, mana potions, antidotes, paralysis cures, and antiseptic. We also need canteens and rations. That should be it, right?” Lily counted off the items we needed on her fingers.

“It’d be nice if we had some rope and hand towels too,” I said.

“I’ll go get some!” she exclaimed and raced off to the shop to buy some.

Personally speaking, my magic bag was pretty well stocked, so I didn’t think I needed much else. I’d recently upgraded it so it was even larger now; it could easily hold around ten tons. I’d also expanded the capacity of my dimension bag, but since it was basically Rocket and Shiromaru’s home at this point, they got mad if I tried to put too much stuff inside of it.

Speaking of Rocket and Shiromaru, they were resting inside of the bag right now.

Once we’d bought what we needed, we decided to have lunch. Since most restaurants were full at this time of day, we just bought some things from an outdoor food cart. We got pork skewers, steamed buns, and chilled fruit, plus grilled fruit for dessert. Apparently the three girls ate a little too much, because they were having trouble walking afterwards. I escorted them back to the place where they were staying, then started on my way back to the Full Belly Inn.

But on the way there, I ran into those three jerks from the guild, who called out to me. “C’mere and talk to us, kid.” I was annoyed, though, so I ignored them and tried to walk past them.

“Stop, you little brat!” Once again, they surrounded me.

I let out a sigh. “What’s your problem? You guys are seriously getting on my nerves. If you want something, hurry up and just spit it out already.”

Apparently that made them pretty mad, and they started screaming at me. It was all stuff like:

“You think you’re so cool, huh?!”

“Shut up and come with us!”

“Stop acting so tough, you little brat!”

But I could barely make out what they were saying. Honestly, I wasn’t even really listening.

Still, I followed them to a back alley. We walked for a while and then when no one else was around, they came to a stop.

“You really screwed us over, you jerk!”

“Yeah, that was pretty rotten!”

“You know what’s gonna happen to you now?”

They had disgusting sneers on their faces.

“Sorry, but I’m not interested. See ya.” I held up my hand and turned to leave, but they circled around in front of me.

“You’re not gonna get away with this!”

“Stop being so cocky!”

“Give us what ya got, or we’ll beat the crap outta ya!”

After yelling this, they started to talk about all the disgusting things they were going to do to the three girls in bed. Obviously, hearing these guys insult my friends right in front of me made me snap.

“What did you just say, you pieces of shit?” I blurted out. They froze for a moment.

“What was that?” they echoed me. Given that they were apparently hard of hearing, I repeated myself more slowly to make sure they could understand.

“I *said*, what rotten things just came out of your mouths, you scumbags?!”

Having finally got the point, they lunged at me furiously.

“You really think a newbie like you can take us on?!”

“Nobody’s gonna care if a kid like you bites it!”

“Shut up and die!”

All three of them came at me at once, but despite being a trio, they seemed to have no concept of working together. Not one of them had the idea of trying to hold me back while the others attacked me. They were completely vulnerable, so I punched one right in the face and then leapt at him.

I knocked him unconscious with one hit, but that wasn’t enough for me. I kicked him in the stomach and then mercilessly broke his

kneecaps. The pain woke him back up and he let out a bloodcurdling scream, but I kicked him in the face to shut him up.

I'd spent a bit of time dealing with him, and once I finally turned around, I found that the other two were already fleeing. Of course, that was the right decision for them, but there was no running away from me at this point. I used boost magic on myself and chased them down.

I caught up to one of them and kicked him in the knees, busting his bones. I punched him in the face while I was at it. Blood spurted from his nose as he crumpled to the ground. I left the man with his bloody nose and went chasing after the last one. When I caught up, I stood in front of him. "Where do you think you're going, leaving your friends behind?" I asked him gently, with a smile on my face.

He was surprised that I had suddenly appeared in front of him and fell to the ground, begging for his life. Liquid started to seep out from between his legs. Ignoring his pleas, I kicked him right in the chin. I heard a cracking noise as his jaw split. He wailed as I dragged him back over to the first guy, who already had one foot in the grave. I didn't forget about the guy with the bloody nose either, and made sure to collect him as well.

Now that we were back where we started, I lined them up side by side and cast recovery magic on them, but left them with their broken bones. This would take away their pain, but make it difficult for them to walk. I set their bones back together sloppy, then doused them with water to wake them up.

Once awake, they looked around, their memories coming back to them. As soon as they saw my face, they looked terrified. I ignored this, saying with a smile, "Now... Won't you tell me one more time what you're going to do to my friends?"

They wet themselves as they trembled. And apparently, no one saw them in town again after that day.

As for me, now that I was done dealing with those pieces of garbage, I safely returned to the Full Belly Inn.

It must've been obvious that I was amped up from my fight, because the moment Dozle saw me he said, "You got up to something today, didn't you?" He didn't press me for any details, but then added, "Just...don't go too far, okay?"

Since I had him here, I went ahead and told him my plans for tomorrow. He said he would keep my room for me while I was gone, as long as he wasn't swamped. It was still pretty early by the time I got home, so after I worked up a sweat training outside for a while, I went to the bathhouse and took a nice, relaxing bath. I wished that the Full Belly Inn had one, but apparently it was a pain to maintain such a facility in this world, so it was rare for inns to have them.

When I got back to the inn, it was dinnertime. The dining room was full and there was nowhere to sit. I had no choice but to eat up in my room. It was a bit of a pain to carry my dishes upstairs, but it ended up working out fine in the end because Shiromaru and Rocket were happy that we could eat together. I felt a little guilty that we hadn't eaten together much lately.

After I was finished with my meal, I decided to go to bed a little early tonight since tomorrow was a big day. I was pretty relaxed after my bath, so I didn't think I'd have much trouble falling asleep. On one hand, I wouldn't mind dreaming about tomorrow's adventures, but on the other hand I wished I could at least see Mom and Dad in my dreams.



Part Three

I woke up feeling refreshed. I must've been tired and needed the extra rest, so going to bed early had been the right choice. I got ready, packing my bag with the few items I still had lying around. I went down to the backyard, then let Shiromaru and Rocket out. I fed them as usual, and washed my face with water from the well. After that, I went into the dining room. It was full of rowdy lodgers. Encountering the same old peaceful scene left me with a sense of relief.

"Morning, Kanna. What's for breakfast today?"

"Morning, Tenma. You can choose from bread or rice gruel today. Which would you like?" she asked. They cultivated rice out here, and although it was more like basmati rice, I was just happy to get to eat rice at all.

"Rice gruel, please."

"Coming right up. We've got some dried fish too. I'll be right back with it." Kanna headed into the kitchen. The dried fish she spoke of had been caught in the river. It had very little fat, but it was good once you got used to it—the taste was kind of addictive.

While Kanna got my food ready, I pulled some homemade pickled plums out of my magic bag. I'd made them from a plant I'd found right before I came to this town that very closely resembled plums. They were called ploomos. When they were unripe, they were actually poisonous just like plums.

"Here you go, Tenma. Oh—you're eating those picked ploomos again? You always have them with rice gruel, don't you?" Kanna said, as she set my breakfast in front of me.

"Yeah, I like them and they're really healthy. Would you like to try one?" I offered Kanna a taste, but she shook her head and said she didn't care for them. Pickled plums weren't very popular around here.

"By the way, Tenma... I heard that you're going out on a job for a few days?"

"That's right. I'm going to hunt dashboards."

"Well, good luck. Just don't do anything reckless, and don't get hurt!" She gave me a little encouragement.

I'd gone hunting countless times before, but this was my first time doing it as a pro. I definitely didn't want to get hurt.

I left the Full Belly Inn and headed towards the town gates. The food stalls were already up and running, so I bought some food and a bunch of snacks to put in my magic bag. That would do me for a few days. I glanced over at Shiromaru, and saw that he was drooling. Apparently he was reacting to the aroma of the meat skewers. He

looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. He would've been cute, except for all that drool...

I relented and bought three skewers, and we ate them on the spot. I gave one to Rocket and then held the other two. One was mine so I went ahead and ate it. I shook the other one to cool it down. Rocket held his skewer with his feelers, and slowly began to absorb it into his body. It was always fascinating to see him eat.

Meanwhile, Shiromaru's eyes followed the skewer back and forth as I waved it around, his head bobbing. Hot foods didn't bother him that much, but this one had just come off the grill and I didn't want him to burn his mouth.

"Hm, it's a bit tough...but it's pretty tasty overall."

Shiromaru's head was still bobbing as he waited for the meat to cool.

Chomp, chomp.

Shiromaru's eyes grew even larger as he continued to wait...

Chomp. Gulp. Ahhh!

Whiiiiine!

I opened my mouth for another bite, and Shiromaru whined sadly. *Sorry, Shiromaru. I'm doing this on purpose... Just forgive me, okay?*

His reactions were so funny that I couldn't help but tease him a bit. With a silent apology, I handed him a skewer.

He happily took the whole thing into his mouth. I carefully pulled the stick out and left all the meat behind. Shiromaru chewed a few times and then swallowed it. Then he begged for another. I bought him a few more skewers to make up for teasing him, and let him and Rocket split them. As usual, Shiromaru ate them in just a few bites.

Lily and the girls arrived at the gate around the same time I did. I waved and they all raced towards me like little puppies, even though they were kitties.

"Morning, Tenma! You haven't been waiting long, have you?"

"Sorry, Tenma!"

"Sorry—we overslept a little!"

"Morning, Lily, Nelly, Milly. I just got here a few minutes ago. You're right on time," I said, greeting them.

"Thank goodness! I couldn't get to sleep last night because these two wouldn't stop talking!" All three of them gave me the exact same excuse at once. They were definitely triplets, all right.

"What? Nelly and Milly were the ones who wouldn't shut up!"

"Yeah, right! It was Lily and Milly!"

"Huh?! It was Lily and Nelly!"

Each of them kept blaming the other two, and refused to back down.

I let out a sigh. "I have the feeling all three of you were up late

talking and that's why you overslept."

"Sorry!" they all apologized at once.

"Anyway... Now that we're all here, let's get going."

"Yeah! If we leave now, we should get to the village before evening!"

"All right! Let's get there as soon as we can, so we can start gathering info!"

"I agree! Let's hurry!"

We went over to the guard standing by the gate and said hello. After we chatted for a bit, the kitty triplets started walking down the path that led to the village.

"Oh, wait! I've got something good for you guys." I took out a large box-shaped item from my magic bag and set it down on the side of the road.

"A carriage?!"

"But what about the horses, Tenma?"

"Is Shiromaru going to pull us?"

All three of them seemed confused. But not even Shiromaru could pull a carriage this size for several hours. I could even sense his surprise through the dimension bag when he heard them talking about him.

"No—this will." I said, and then took out a black metal ball from my bag. I held it in my hand and let magic flow through it. "Awaken," I said, and reddish-black lines of light shot across the surface of the ball. Once the light disappeared, the thing that had been a ball now stood up on four legs. It resembled a horse, standing two meters tall and three meters long.

"Wow, I can't believe it!"

"That's going to pull us?"

"It's huge!"

"There's more. Go, Rocket!" I ordered. Rocket slithered up onto the horse's back. He opened up the hatch that was on its neck and then climbed inside. Rocket closed the hatch, and then the horse's eyes glowed red. Then the horse trotted over to the carriage, just like a real horse would. I went ahead and hitched the horse up to the carriage.

Though the three girls were shocked to see the horse, they were even more shocked to see Rocket climb inside of it.

"Whoa—it moved!"

"Wow, it looks like a real horse!"

"Tenma, what happened to Rocket?!"

They began to freak out. It was certainly loud with the three of them around.

"It's a pseudo-horse golem which can move with the assistance of

magical control. I named the horse Valley Wind,” I explained proudly. I’d used a magic core to make it, so I guess you could call it an artificial monster. I was hoping that it could become autonomous in the future and move without Rocket’s help. I’d used the magic core from the dragon zombie that Rocket had shrewdly recovered for me.

Since the magic core was from an ancient dragon, it was over a meter wide, but thankfully it had several cracks in it and had split into three parts. Two of them were about a third of its original size, and then the remaining part had broken into dozens of smaller parts. I’d used one of those smaller pieces for Valley Wind’s core. For its outer shell, I’d taken high-purity steel and enchanted it to become magic steel, so it was much tougher than ordinary golems, which were made out of rocks or dirt.

It was also possible for me to modify its outer shell, so eventually I wanted to add missiles or maybe redo it using orichalcum to give it a more fantasy-like feel and boost its strength.

“What should we call it when Rocket’s inside?”

“Rockwind? Windrock?”

“Which is better?”

“Just call it ‘Valley Wind.’ That’s the name of the horse itself. Rocket’s just helping me to control it using magic.” My explanation didn’t seem to make much sense to them. Eventually, they gave up and accepted that the horse’s name was Valley Wind.

“So then we’re going to take this carriage to the village?”

“We’ll get there way faster that way!”

“Lucky us!”

The three of them climbed into the carriage. I sat in the driver’s seat and gave orders to Valley Wind, and the carriage began to move. If this were a normal horse, I’d have to control it with reins, but since Rocket was inside controlling the horse, all I had to do was tell him where to go. I could even have gone inside the carriage and taken a nap at this point, if I wanted. I’d told Rocket to stop and come get me if anything unexpected came up. But on this journey, I wasn’t going to foist all the responsibility on him.

The journey to the village was smooth. At first, the girls were noisy and excited because the carriage moved just like it was being pulled by a real horse. However, all the commotion must’ve exhausted them because they fell asleep after that.

“Hey, you three. I can see the village! It’s time to wake up!” I called into the carriage some time later. I caught the sound of rustling from inside, so they must’ve heard me.

Right before we arrived at the village, all three of them emerged from the carriage at the same time and said, “Morning...” with yawns.

It was probably about three in the afternoon. It had taken around

three hours to get here from Gunjo City. We'd gone at a fairly slow pace, but still made good time. I stopped Valley Wind right by the gates and got out of the carriage with the three girls.

"Let's go see the mayor, because that's who posted the job." I handed the three of them wet towels. "But first, wipe your faces."

While they did that, I stuffed Valley Wind back into my magic bag. Rocket had exited the horse when we got out of the carriage and went inside the dimension bag right away. I told Shiromaru to stay in the bag just in case, because I didn't want him to spook the dashboards. He'd pouted about it, and was currently sleeping inside the bag.

We asked a villager near the gate where the mayor's house was, and they told us it was about five minutes away. We thanked the villager and walked for a while. Then we saw a building that looked nicer than the others around it.

"This must be it. It looks different from the other houses. Maybe because it's the mayor's house?"

"Maybe. This is a weird village, though... It feels so dark and creepy here," Lily said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean!" Nelly agreed.

"That villager looked like he was sizing us up too," Milly chimed in.

"Anyway, let's see what the mayor has to say." I knocked on the door. We heard someone approaching right away.

"Yes, yes? Who is it?" The door opened with a click and a round man with a smile appeared.

"We're from the Gunjo City adventurers' guild. We're the ones who took your job posting. Are you the mayor?" I spoke for the four of us.

The man nodded and then looked at the three girls behind me. "I see. Thank you. Please, come in and I'll give you more details." He gestured for us to come into his house, then showed us to the living room, where we all sat down. A woman with a scarf wrapped around her neck brought us some tea. She looked absolutely exhausted. Her face was so pale that she looked sick. She left the room right after she'd set the tea down. The mayor didn't seem to be concerned about her appearance at all, though.

"Thank you for accepting the job. My name is Banza, and I'm the mayor of this town. Only about a hundred people live here." After he'd introduced himself, he told us the details of the job.

According to the mayor, a pack of about five or six dashboards began appearing at night about a week ago. They were eating up the crops that hadn't been harvested yet. At first, the men of the village had tried to defeat them, but apparently there was a very strong dashboard among the group and the men decided it was beyond their

abilities to handle it. That led the mayor to post his request.

The damaged field was a few minutes' walk from the village. It would start getting dark in about two hours, so we decided to go check it out now. The mayor said he would show us the way himself.

As soon as we left the mayor's house, I felt people watching us from other houses and from the shadows of nearby buildings. At first I thought maybe it was just because they weren't used to seeing adventurers, but then I felt the malice in all of their gazes, especially directed towards the three girls. I started to get the feeling something bad was going to happen.

As I used Detection, I pretended not to notice the stares. About half the villagers were hiding nearby. The girls hadn't noticed all the people watching them yet, but looked uneasy all the same, which was no wonder with that many people spying on us at once.

Once we'd left the village, I didn't sense anyone else watching us. We walked for about ten minutes and arrived at the field where the dashboards were said to appear.

"This is the field they damaged. There are still some crops left, so we think they might come back again tonight," Banza said.

The field was smaller than half a soccer field.

"Can we look around a bit?"

"Go ahead. I still have some work to do, so I'll be heading back first. Do you mind?"

"No, that's fine. We'll stay here and wait for the boars to come. We'll come to your house in the morning and give our report."

"Very well, then. I'll leave it in your hands," Banza said. As he walked back towards the village, I used Identify on him. At that point, everything made sense.

"Hey... Tenma? Shouldn't we go back to the village first to prepare?" Lily asked me.

I looked out over the field. "This whole job is fishy. It'll be easier to deal with them here than in the village," I said firmly.

They were on the verge of letting out cries of surprise, but I put a finger to my lips, urging them to be quiet. They realized I was serious and quietly nodded.

"What's going on, Tenma?"

"Why do you think it's fishy?"

"This village definitely feels weird, but it's not nice to judge them based on that."

The three of them whispered to me in turn. I told them what I'd observed on the way here. We only saw three people in the village, but I'd felt many people watching us as we left Banza's house, and I felt malice in their stares. They should have known that we were adventurers who'd come in response to the job posting, so why would

everyone be hiding? But most of all, I felt like there was something more to this request.

The mayor said the dashboards had been coming for a week, but this field looked like it had barely been touched. We'd passed through other fields on the way here, but Banza hadn't said a word about them. And he'd definitely made it sound like this was the only field they'd touched.

Finally, I pointed to the boar tracks. "And just look at the tracks. They're all exactly the same size and *exactly the same depth*."

"Wait, you're right!"

"What if those tracks were just made by the same boar?"

"Hmm... Aren't you overthinking this?" the three of them said.

I pointed to two boar tracks. "Then why are these two the same depth too?" I pointed to tracks on top of the rows that had been planted, and then to tracks that were on flat ground.

Suspicious, the three girls went and looked. "Ah!" Lily exclaimed. "You're right, that is weird. This isn't normal at all."

It seemed like she'd finally understood what I was trying to say. But the other two still didn't get it, so I had to explain it in simpler terms. "When you plant crops in rows like this, you have to make mounds to put the seeds in. So not only will this part of the field be higher up than the flatter part of the field, but the soil there is softer. A footprint would sink deeper into the soil where the seeds are planted than into the footpath."

And yet these footprints were all the same depth. That meant they'd been made artificially. I searched around the field and found the same thing. When I showed Nelly and Milly, they finally realized what was fishy about this job.

As the three of us walked around, pretending to plan our next move, I used Detection again. I spotted five people hiding nearby, in a location that was hard to see from the fields. They seemed to be hiding in order to watch us, and had already switched out people twice. And the pièce de résistance was what I'd found when I checked Banza's status.

Name: Banza

Age: 46

Class: Human

Title: Bandit Leader

HP: 8000

MP: 11000

Strength: B-

Defense: C+

Agility: C-

Magic: D-
Mind: D
Growth: D-
Luck: C

Skills

Axe: 6
Brawling: 6
Night Vision: 6
Sword: 5
Traps: 5
Throwing: 4
Debuff Resistance: 4
Conceal: 3
Sensory Buff: 2

His title said that he was the leader of a band of bandits. So he was a total liar. But since I hadn't told the triplets that I could use Identify, even if I *did* try to tell the girls who he was, I didn't have any proof. That's why I'd searched the field for clues first, and told them about the strange things I'd noticed about the village since we'd arrived. I hadn't expected to find evidence so easily, though, so I was taken a bit off guard.

"Should we run, then?"

"I think that's for the best."

"Let's go back to the guild and explain. Right, Tenma?"

The three of them spoke to me.

"I don't think we should," I replied firmly.

"But why?"

"Why, Tenma?!"

"It's dangerous here, Tenma!"

The triplets were surprised. I kept my focus on the people watching over us as I explained why. "Listen. Even if we go back to the guild right now, we have no proof that the villagers were trying to harm us. By that time, they'd probably have covered up their tracks. And even if they didn't cover them up, they'd probably just say that it was someone playing a prank or something. The guild might think we were cowards trying to cover up a failed mission, and that would ruin our reputation.

"The guild would probably put restrictions on us, and someone would come out here to investigate. Obviously, it would be nice if they found proof that something was going on, but if these people were willing to go to such lengths to fake boar attacks, they'd probably flee the village if we suddenly disappeared. And even if we

found them afterwards, they'd have plenty of time to destroy evidence. If the guild questioned them afterwards, they'd probably just say they had to leave the village because we ran away and the boars were too dangerous."

The triplets looked pale. "So what should we do, then?" Lily asked, on behalf of the three of them.

"That's simple. We have to defeat them. If they start this by attacking us, then we have just cause to fight back, even if it means killing them. It might be difficult to prove it, but if they've set a trap this elaborate, surely we can find some evidence if we look for it."

The girls looked at me in wide-eyed surprise, but I ignored this reaction and continued to explain my plan. "First, we'll stake out the field and pretend like we don't suspect anything. We should split up into two groups to divide their attention. But it won't actually be us staking out the place—it'll be mimic golems who look like us. We'll wait inside the carriage with a magical barrier around us. As long as you guys are quiet, they won't be able to see us. I'll instruct the golems to fall down if they're attacked. Once the golems fall, I'm sure someone will come to check out what's going on, and that'll be our signal to go incapacitate them."

"How are we going to do that?"

"There's a hundred of them!"

"We're way outnumbered!"

"Don't worry about that. I'll instruct the mimic golems to incapacitate enemies who approach, but not to kill them. Then you three will work as a team to secure them. Once that happens, I'll send five medium-sized golems out to be your bodyguards. They'll listen to whatever orders you give them, so use them as you see fit. There'll probably be one or two people who try to get close to the golems, so I'll have Shiromaru either incapacitate the remaining people who are hiding, or come guard you myself. In the meantime, I'll go catch Banza. We have to get the leader before anyone figures out our plan, or it'll all be pointless. It doesn't matter if some small fries escape, so put protecting yourselves first. Now, let's get ready."

I explained the plan in detail, and they nodded quietly without complaints.

First, I made a spot where the mimic golems could act as bait. It was about fifty meters from the field. I dug a hole about two meters wide and fifty centimeters deep. Then I made a trench from dirt outside of the hole. I dug another hole about thirty meters away from that and did the same thing there.

I marked the place where I'd put the carriage, which was about fifty meters behind the trench. It wasn't easy for the people who were spying on us to see us there. If it looked like we'd just ducked out of

sight, they probably wouldn't come looking for us.

"All right—we're pretty much set," I told the three of them. "Let's eat before the sun goes down." We started making our meals in front of the spot that I'd marked. It was just a simple soup made from ingredients we'd gotten in town and some dried meat. We ate that as well as bread we'd bought earlier that day for our dinner. I thought we'd probably be hungry later, so I made a little extra soup and put it in my magic bag to have for a late-night snack.

The sun set not even half an hour after we'd eaten dinner. Now everything was dark and it was harder to see. I created a magical barrier around the position I'd marked and then set up the carriage there. The spies couldn't see what we were getting up to in this darkness, and according to Detection, they hadn't moved one bit since we'd started.

The magical barrier I made had a radius of about two hundred meters, with the carriage at the center of it, so we'd be able to sense when the enemy came.

Things had certainly changed from when we'd thought this was a simple job just hunting some dashboards, I thought to myself. Meanwhile, I started to create the mimic golems. I turned towards the triplets and said, "Can you each give me a strand of your hair?"

They all blushed. "What do you need it for?"

"Are you sure this isn't for something weird?"

"I don't mind as long as it's *you*, Tenma."

I had no idea what was going through their heads with those weird responses.

"I need it to make the golems," I said casually. For some reason they all looked disappointed at that, but then they each held out a strand of their hair. I wasn't sure if it was just my imagination, but I thought I heard them muttering things like, "Darn it..." and "No need to be so shy" as I took the hair from them.

At any rate, I put the strands of hair along with the cores inside of the golems, then infused them with mana. The golems slowly transformed before our eyes, and they resembled the triplets. However...they were stark naked.

I started to panic. The hair made the golems resemble their owners, but I didn't realize they'd turn out looking so...well...*feminine*.

The girls must not have expected to see naked doppelgängers of themselves either, because they looked even more shocked than me. Forget about panicked—they were thoroughly beside themselves.

"Meowww! What do you think you're doing, Tenmyaaa?!"

"Tenma, you little rascal! Degenerate! Pervert!!!"

"You're such a perv, Tenma! If you wanted to see it so bad, we could've just showed you!"

Lily had gone into full catgirl mode, Nelly was cursing me out, and as for Milly, she was muttering something strange to herself, frantically trying to cover the golems with blankets the whole time.

Meanwhile, I got on my hands and knees and begged for forgiveness, desperately trying not to look at the golems. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that! When I practiced this before I made a golem that looked like Shiromaru, so I didn't expect this to happen!" Now that I thought about it, though, Shiromaru was a wolf, so it was obvious that if I made a golem that resembled a human they'd also turn out naked. But I didn't say that out loud.

While I apologized, the triplets took extra clothes out of their bags and dressed the golems. Of course, my forehead was still glued to the ground, and I didn't look up until they gave me permission to.

A few minutes later, they finally did so, and I looked up to see two sets of catgirls staring at me. Three of them were the original triplets, and the other three were golems that had a pretty decent resemblance to the triplets.

"Now that I'm looking closely, they don't look *that* much like us."

"Yeah, but a normal person won't be able to tell from far away at night."

"Tenma, are you sure you're not using this magic for anything weird?" After Milly asked this, all three of them chorused, "Well, Tenma?!"

"Give me a break. I swear, I'm not doing anything weird with it," I answered. They all grinned at me naughtily.

"Uh-oh, Tenma. Did you just imagine doing something with it?"

"Even though we were only asking if you were using the golems for pranks?"

"Yeah, what were you imagining? Tell your big sisters!"

All of a sudden they were sidling up to me, acting very unlike their usual selves.

I let out a sigh. "What are you guys talking about? Not to mention, it's too late to suddenly act like you're my big sisters. Anyway, I'm gonna make my own golem now, so can you guys please turn around?"

Their eyes sparkled like they'd just caught a mouse and instead of turning around, they came even closer.

"We're gonna have to take a good look at it!"

"Yeah—you saw us, so it's payback!"

"Ooh, I'm so excited! This is my first time seeing a man naked!"

Now they were just being annoying, so I had the mimic golem triplets catch the girls and force them to turn their backs while I made my own golem. Thank goodness this was all before I'd told the golems to follow the girls' orders.

“Not fair!”

“This is tyranny!”

“Stingy! Just show us already!”

They clamored together, but I ignored them and continued with my work. I was a little worried the villagers would hear the commotion, though, so I had the mimic golems put their hands over the triplets’ mouths.

Once I’d put clothes on my golem, I told the mimic golems to let the girls go. They all muttered complaints under their breaths. I knew it would just be a pain to indulge them, so I ignored them again. I instructed the golems to follow the girls’ orders, and then was about to send them over to the trenches in two groups, but the girls began to argue about whose golem doppelgänger got to be partners with mine. In the end, it was decided by a game of rock, paper, scissors.

Nelly’s golem ended up being paired with mine. I wasn’t sure why it mattered in the first place, so I just observed the entire ordeal, feeling rather puzzled.

After the golems headed to the trenches, we had nothing to do until the villagers made their move, so we ended up resting in the carriage for a while.

Part Four

“Just as I thought—it doesn’t seem like any dashboards are coming.” I wasn’t surprised that the monsters weren’t making an appearance at the field. Shiromaru heard me from inside my bag and made a sad face, so I gave him a hunk of meat to comfort him. That definitely lightened his mood, and he tore into the meat happily.

Meanwhile, Rocket stared intently as Shiromaru ate. Shiromaru noticed and tried to give him a little piece, but Rocket pushed the meat away, turning it down. I guess he just wanted to watch Shiromaru eating happily. Shiromaru must not have expected to be turned down, because he glanced back and forth between the meat and Rocket a few times before once again biting into it. I felt strangely impressed by Shiromaru’s appetite when he started with the piece he’d been willing to offer to Rocket.

It was a couple hours after midnight when I felt several pings on my Detection radar, which I’d kept open while we waited. Just in case, I used Identify on them, and as expected, they were *not* a group of dashboards.

“The enemy is on the move! You three get ready to move too!”

The three girls leapt up from their nap and frantically started getting ready. Lily grabbed her bow, Nelly grabbed her dual blades, and Milly grabbed her sword and shield so that the girls could be ready to strike at any moment. With the exchange of a few words, they were done.

Meanwhile, from within my dimension bag, Shiromaru was ready to strike. As for me, I extracted a sword from my magic bag. It was the same general shape and style as the one I’d used before, but it was forged from the metal ridges that had grown from the dragon zombie’s shoulders. It was an Excellent quality weapon—its sharpness and strength weren’t even comparable to my old one, which had only been Good quality.

“Hey, guys. The enemy is about fifty meters behind the golems now. It’s almost time.”

Ignoring the carriage, the enemy villagers approached the golems. It seemed the magic barrier I’d erected was working.

“My golem has fallen. It looks like the villagers are firing arrows. Let’s do this. You ready?”

Arrows came raining down in quick succession. The golems took the arrows, following my instructions to fall down the moment they were attacked. About five minutes later, in my mind’s eye I saw the villagers approaching the trenches in groups of two. I used Detection

again, extending its range even farther to spot forty people fifty meters away from one trench and thirty more people hiding a hundred meters away. Meanwhile, the remaining thirty-eight people were still in the village.

I stilled my breath, watching as the ones who approached the golems, who were our spies, were caught.

“Now! Let’s begin the operation! Be careful, you three!”

“You too, Tenma!” the girls answered in unison.

I released Shiromaru and gave him orders to attack the hidden villagers—especially the rear guard—after which I deployed the golem guards. Next, I used flying magic to head towards the village so I could catch Banza.

Now that our golem spies had been caught, their covers were blown as the bandit villagers who had been slowly approaching the trenches realized what they were. This made the bandits more cautious of their surroundings. And that’s when they noticed the three shadows, about to attack them from behind...

Field (Wildcat Princesses)

“Don’t hurt the girls or we won’t be able to sell ’em for as much!”

“I’m gonna have ’em to myself first...”

“You idiot! You mean *we’re* gonna have ’em to ourselves!”

The bandits exchanged lewd laughter. They were clearly underestimating their opponents, who just so happened to be three young women. The only person they thought could give them a run for their money was a young man like Tenma.

But they were wrong. The girls might’ve been young, but they were a Rank C party, and they all possessed Rank C abilities individually too. And when they teamed up, they could attack with close to Rank B force. That was pretty impressive for individuals who had only belonged to the guild for two years. It wasn’t unusual for it to take ten or twenty years to achieve Rank C in the guild, and there was quite a gap between Ranks C and B.

And since they were able to use simple Fire, Water, and Earth elemental magic from the very start, the guild believed they were capable of advancing to Rank B, or even Rank A. Not only that, but fighting in a group brought out their natural abilities. They were able to use certain combinations that were only possible because they were triplets, and were famous among adventurers for being just as strong as Rank B parties.

“Nelly—I’ll aim for the one with the spear. You take care of the rest. Don’t go too fast, though.”

“Got it!”

“Milly, you attack the ones coming towards us. I’ll provide backup.”

“I’m on it!”

“I’m gonna go meet up with the mimic golems! There are more enemies than we expected, so we’ll have to cover each other’s blind spots! And I think the guard golems will probably be here soon!” Lily gave out orders to her sisters. She was the most mature out of the three of them, and since she *was* the oldest, it was only natural that she took on a leadership role.

“All right!” her sisters answered in unison.

Since Nelly was the most agile and had the best physical attacks of the triplets, she was often the one in front.

Milly could be a bit laid-back, but she was the most clever of the three of them, so she often fought sandwiched between the other two. They were generally quite skilled in all areas, so even if one of them had to swap out her weapon, it wasn’t a problem since another could cover for her.

A bandit armed with a spear tried to approach Lily, but he took an arrow to the face. Another bandit was so distracted by the sight that he left himself vulnerable to Nelly’s attack. The bandit coughed up blood and collapsed. Milly didn’t let this moment of confusion go to waste; she ran in between the bandits and widened her path with her sword and shield.

The golems finally caught up and started attacking the bandits, strengthening the girls’ ranks. The bandits had let down their guard, allowing Lily to join up with two of the mimic golems.

“Damn it! I got sloppy because I figured they were just girls! Hey! Everyone with bows in the back—come here!” One of the bandits called out to the guys who were supposed to be hiding in the back, but they didn’t respond. “Hey! I said, come *here*!” He hollered again in fury, but still there was no response.

Just then, someone landed by his feet. He took a better look at it as it rolled across the ground, and then realized it was the head of one of his comrades who should have been hiding behind him.

“AWOOOOO!” At the same time, he heard a loud howl. The bandits who had heard it cowered in fear, which distracted them from the fact that they were coming under attack. Obviously that was a fatal mistake, especially since the girls were not the kind of people who’d let such a chance slip past them. Having joined up with the golems, the girls inflicted a huge amount of damage to the bandits.

At last, the bandits realized what a huge blunder they’d made by underestimating the girls, and began to attack them in earnest, but it was too late—Shiromaru lunged at them from behind. They were out of the frying pan and into the fire. Shiromaru’s howls marked the end

of their lives.

After that, Shiromaru and the golems hunted down the remaining dozen or so bandits.

Field (Shiromaru)

Several minutes earlier, Shiromaru had leapt out from Tenma's bag and used his sense of smell to locate the enemy. He'd snuck silently up behind them.

"Hey, something's off! The guys who went in first have all been caught!"

"They might give us the signal, so let's get ready to strike!"

The bandits had no clue that Shiromaru had snuck up behind them. They stayed hidden, their eyes fixed on the trench. But in the next moment, all fifteen of them had their heads lopped off so quickly they didn't even have time to scream. The last thing they saw in this world was a white slash of wind slicing between them.

Afterwards, Shiromaru looked around to make sure none of them had survived. He moved on to sneak up behind the rear guard. After he'd annihilated them as well, he joined back up with Lily and the others.

Banza's Mansion (Tenma)

One minute after the battle began, I was flying above Banza's mansion, checking out the scene. Including Banza, there were twenty-nine people inside. The remaining nine people were in a different house nearby.

I used Detection to count the number of occupants, and then landed quietly near the house to take a look.

"Boss, it looks like we're gonna pull this off. I don't care about the boy, but the girls'll fetch a high price."

"Can't believe there are three of them with the same pretty face! I bet some greedy noble will pay out the nose for 'em!"

With a repulsive smile, one of Banza's henchmen chatted with his boss, seemingly in high spirits.

Meanwhile, Banza himself wore an equally disgusting smile—he looked positively thrilled. "I knew my plan would go off without a hitch! But I never expected we'd get such fine goods right off the bat—and three of them, no less!" he replied with a high-pitched guffaw.

I felt anger growing in the pit of my stomach. This was partly because of what he planned to do to my friends, but also because my very first official job for the guild should have been reason to celebrate, but he had ruined it.

“This village is pretty convenient. Not only is it pretty deserted, but adventurers and the knights from the city rarely come here. That’s how we were able to take over so easily. And if a stray traveler happens to wander in, we can just pretend to welcome them to throw them off guard, drug them to sleep, then capture them,” Banza continued triumphantly, clearly completely oblivious to my presence.

“It was so satisfying when we killed all the villagers we captured—starting with the useless old hags!” This revolting comment from Banza’s henchman was where I hit my limit.

I cast Boost magic on my surroundings to make them harder to destroy—except for the wall right in front of me. With my left fist, I punched a hole in the wall, shattering it with my magic. The wall exploded like an M18 Claymore had just gone off, and the shrapnel blew towards the bandits, inflicting a huge amount of damage on them.

Ten of the people inside died instantly, and nine more were at death’s door. But the ten who survived, including Banza, had barely sustained any injuries because those who’d died in the blast had acted as human shields. Still, the surviving bandits were frozen, utterly baffled by what had happened.

With my beloved *kogarasu maru* sword slung over my shoulder, I stepped into the house as the smoke from the blast swirled around me. Most of the survivors didn’t notice me, but Banza was the first to realize what had happened. The moment he laid eyes upon me, he screamed, “What are you doing here? Is this all *your* doing?!”

“So what if it is?” I answered calmly.



“You won’t get away with this! Men! It’s just one little kid! Kill him!” Banza ordered his nine surviving henchmen to attack, while not moving a muscle himself. I let out a low chuckle as I watched him.

“What are you laughing about, you little brat?!” one of the henchmen stood up and screamed. Apparently he didn’t like my attitude. The others followed suit, standing up and yelling at me in turn. They grabbed broken bits of chairs, rubble from the wall—anything they could use as weapons—and came towards me.

I stared at them. “This is all my doing. Do you not understand that this ‘one little kid’ killed nineteen of you in an instant?”

The realization finally hit them, and slowly, the henchmen began to back away again, overwhelmed. Banza grabbed a nearby sword and shoved it into the hands of one of the men, ordering him to kill me. Actually, it was less of an order and more of a threat. Half-crazed, the man lunged towards me.

“Out of my way.” I dodged his attack easily, then swung my sword. To onlookers, it probably didn’t seem as though I’d put much strength into my attack, and yet my blade sliced through the man from his shoulder to his hip like butter, cleaving him in half.

Once they’d witnessed this, Banza’s remaining henchmen raced for the door, ignoring Banza’s cries for them to stay where they were.

“I-It won’t open!”

“Why won’t it open?!”

“The window! Break through the window so we can escape!”

“The glass won’t break! What’s going on?!”

They all began to panic. I wasn’t surprised, of course, as I’d used Boost magic on all the walls, windows, and doors of the building apart from the one wall I’d blasted through. In other words, I’d backed them into a corner. They were nothing more than prey to me now—they were powerless before me.

There were only three ways for them to escape: busting through the roof, digging through the floor, or somehow getting past me. Of course, there was one other option—they could die at my hands. Now that I thought about it, they actually had a lot of options. That seemed like a good thing for them.

“What? You’re not gonna run away?” I challenged them.

Desperate, they began pleading for their lives. “But we didn’t do anything!”

“Y-Yeah! The boss threatened us, so we had no choice!”

“It’s all his fault! We never meant to make an enemy out of you!”

Banza opened his mouth to yell at them, but I spoke first. “Shut up, you scumbags.” My voice was filled with such malice and anger it surprised even me.

The blood drained out of the henchmen's faces and they began to tremble. Several of them pissed themselves.

"What did you do to the people who lived in this village? When they begged for their lives, did you show mercy? Did you ever imagine you'd find yourself in the same situation?"

"He'll never let us go! The only way to survive is to kill him! Everyone at once! Do it now!" Banza yelled at them again. With whatever makeshift weapons they could find, the henchmen charged at me, half-crazed. But even in a situation like this, Banza still didn't move a muscle.

I barely had to move, myself—I slashed diagonally at the henchmen coming towards me, then back up in the opposite direction, horizontally from left to right, diagonally up to the left, downwards with a descending vertical attack, back up and then down again at a diagonal, then horizontally across from right to left. As a result, every single one of Banza's henchmen ended up dead—cut clean in half from my sword.

Now Banza was the only man standing.

"You really think you're the king of the hill, don't you? You just stand there and watch while your men do all the work. It makes me sick." I was speaking to Banza, who couldn't hide his clear surprise that I'd killed every last one of his men so easily.

All of a sudden, though, he smiled. "Well, well. You're pretty good, huh? Why don't you join up with me instead? You'll be the boss, of course, and I'll be your number two. Those girls can be tied for fifth place. We can split all our profits—you four can have seventy percent, and I'll get thirty. How's that sound, eh?" He rubbed his hands together as he approached me. But then...

"You fool!" he cried.

"*You're* the fool."

He took a knife out of his pocket and lunged at me, but only an idiot wouldn't have been able to see that coming. I sliced off the hand that held the knife. It sizzled, giving off a burnt odor, then fell to the floor with a plop.

"*Gaaaaahhh! My haaaaand!!!*"

As he'd approached me, I'd cast Fire magic on my *kogarasu maru*. Apparently he hadn't noticed my blade gleaming a faint red as it burned.

He screamed, clutching the charred stump of his missing right hand. I ignored his cries, and cut off the rest of his limbs. Now he couldn't fight back or run away. Every time I lopped off one of his limbs, he would scream. Finally, he passed out from the pain and went quiet, then pissed himself. At any rate, his wounds were seared closed from the heat of my blade, so he wasn't bleeding freely and probably

wouldn't bleed to death. He might decide to bite off his own tongue once he came to and bleed to death that way, though, so I tore off a bit of one of his henchmen's clothes and stuffed it into Banza's mouth.

I was wondering why the remaining nine people who'd been hiding in the other house hadn't come over to this building yet. I used Detection and saw that they were still in the house. Not only that, but they hadn't even shifted positions. A possibility sprang to mind, so I cautiously began heading towards the house.

Once I arrived, I quietly opened the door and went inside. I could hear the clinking of metal coming from a room in the back of the house. I carefully made my way towards the noise. It sounded like the people had been chained up together or something.

I'd used Identify on them beforehand, so I knew they weren't dangerous. I slowly opened up the door to not spook them.

"Is someone there?"

I used Light magic to illuminate the room, and it was just as I'd suspected—there were women inside. They were all gagged and chained up with their hands tied behind their backs and their legs shackled. They looked frightened at the sight of me and began to cry.

Then, just as I was wondering what to do...

"Tenmaaaa! Where are you?"

"Woof!"

"What is it, Shiromaru?"

"Is Tenma over there?"

"Woof!"

At the sound of their voices, I left the house temporarily and beckoned the four of them over. "Hey! I'm over here! Are any of you hurt?" I called. The triplets and Shiromaru had been walking up the path that led to Banza's mansion, but they ran over once they spotted me.

"We're not hurt!"

"Are you okay, Tenma?"

"Why are you here?"

I told them I wasn't hurt and then said, "Something a bit unexpected happened..." Afterwards, I gave them the whole explanation. I told them how I'd killed Banza's henchmen and incapacitated him, and how I'd discovered a bunch of girls who'd been held captive in this house, and that the girls seemed scared of me.

The triplets said they'd free the hostages and explain things to them, and went inside. Meanwhile, I took out a stockpot and started boiling a bunch of water. Then I took out another pot and made a simple soup.

Fifteen minutes later, the triplets emerged from the house with the other girls in tow. Several of the girls were very weak, and many of

them were still afraid at the sight of a man, so I left the triplets with the soup and the boiling water and took my leave.

With the girls in charge of the newly freed hostages, I decided to go back to Banza's house. The triplets told me that there were about twenty captured enemies by the field and that the golems were watching over them, and asked me to do something about them. So I decided to head there first.

The field was a mess of blood, body parts, and corpses. In the middle were twenty-three tied-up bandits. The golems were standing guard over them. At the sight of me, the bandits began to scream. They were so annoying that I used the Lightning elemental spell Stun to shut them up.

Now that the bandits were quiet, I reached into my bag and took out thirty small golem cores and planted them into the fields. Thirty earth golems slowly sprouted from the ground. I ordered them to gather up the dead bodies and in no time at all, there was a mountain of corpses. I used magic to freeze the bodies, then put them into my bag as evidence. If it turned out that I couldn't use them as evidence, then I'd just have the golems bury them somewhere later.

There was nothing else left to do here, so I told the golems to carry the prisoners all the way to Banza's house. I put the carriage back in my bag and then flew back to Banza's house myself. Once I was there, I looked around.

"Don't you think you went a little overboard?" If one of my companions had been there with me at the moment, that was probably what they would've said.

The back wall of the house had been blown out and there were twenty-eight bodies inside. Nineteen of them either had holes blasted through their bodies from the rubble, or were missing entire body parts due to the explosion. The remaining nine had been cut in half and their organs were strewn about. The only survivor was Banza, and he'd had his hands and feet chopped off, had pissed himself, and was now lying unconscious.

It was no wonder that the room reeked with the stench of filth and blood.

"Well—time to clean up!" I took three medium-sized golems out and had them clean up the place. First, they took Banza outside and poured water on him to wash him. He woke up in the middle of his bath and tried to resist, but I had the golems tie him to a tree with some rope.

The other golems carried the rubble and broken furniture outside. By that time, the small golems had arrived with the bandits we'd taken prisoner, carrying them like sacks of rice. I had ten of them carry the bodies out from inside the house, and directed the others to

set the prisoners down by Banza.

Using magic, I fashioned a box large enough to fit the prisoners inside. It was made of strong clay with walls about fifty centimeters thick. It was more than five meters tall, so even if they got untied, they wouldn't be able to escape very easily. But I set the remaining ten golems to guard them just in case.

I went back around and saw that the golems had finished carrying everything out of the house. Now all we had to do was clean up the blood and the filth. I put my thumb and forefinger of my right hand together and used some Water magic. Water sprayed forth from my fingers. At first it was just a thin arc of water, but as I continued focusing more mana into my fingers, the water gained pressure. It sprayed the blood and filth from the walls and floor.

I had to concentrate very hard on the task at hand, because putting too much mana into this spell could destroy the remaining walls or the floor. Now that the walls and floors were rinsed, I used Wind magic to dry them and move the excess water outside. Finally, I was done with cleaning. It looked pretty good compared to what we'd started with. Even if this house was never used for anything again, I'd wanted to clean it so it didn't spread disease or lure in monsters with its stench.

Finally, I froze the corpses outside and placed them into my bag. I burned the broken furniture and got rid of the remains. Now that I was done with that, I used Earth magic on the field to obtain a bunch of clay. I mixed the clay with straw and used Earth magic on it to fashion another box. It was about five meters wide, four meters across, and sixty centimeters deep. I used Wind and Fire magic to dry and cure the box respectively, then it was done. I'd made a bathtub from clay. I thought it was pretty good for my first try. At the very least, it'd hold up to a few uses.

I put the bathtub into my magic bag, then headed towards the yard of the house where the girls were. I went from the back so that I didn't scare the freed hostages. The yard was fairly big. I cut down some weeds and then hardened the earth before setting the bathtub down in a corner of the yard.

Next, I built up a bunch of walls to surround the bathtub. They were made from earth just like the tub itself, and I opened up a hole in them to create an entrance.

Finally, I filled the tub with water and used Fire magic to heat it up. I wasn't confident enough in my construction abilities to make a roof that wouldn't possibly collapse, so I just left it without one for now. The bath was ready to be used, so I called out to the triplets, who were inside.

"What's up, Tenma?"

“Wow! What’s that little shed?”

“What’d you make?”

They were brimming with curiosity about the bathhouse. I told them what I’d made and their eyes went wide and they exclaimed in unison, “A bath?!” They gleefully ran to check it out.

“I want you to get the girls inside bathed. I don’t have soap or towels, though, so you guys will have to take care of that.”

Lily rushed back into the house to ask the girls where she might be able to find those things. Apparently, there were no clean towels in that house, but there might be in another, so the triplets split up to look. Also, according to the former hostages, there was no soap in this village, so they’d just have to make do.

The triplets found towels and pails for the bathtub. The tub could hold four at a time, so the triplets each took three girls with them and took turns using the bath, using Water magic to fill it up again when it got low.

While the girls were bathing, I took a walk and found the village’s food storage, so I decided to check it out. As I was leaving, the triplets hammered it into my head that under no circumstances was I to peek at them. The thought had never even crossed my mind, but at any rate I’d agreed, of course.

The building where they stored food was larger than I’d expected, but there wasn’t much left inside. Banza and his men had probably eaten it all. There might not have been any food left, but all of the bandits’ treasure was piled up in one corner. There was probably at least 1,000,000G, two small boxes stuffed full of jewels, one hundred forty-six swords, one hundred thirty-two spears, one hundred thirty bows, and twenty barrels full of arrows (probably containing around ten to twelve thousand arrows in total). There was an abnormal amount of weapons here, to be sure.

“That’s odd. The money and the jewels make sense...but why would a hundred bandits need so many weapons?” I figured I should discuss it with the girls first, and decided to deal with the weapons later. I left the building just as Milly’s group was done with their bath.

“Milly, can I talk to you for a moment?” I asked.

Milly’s hair was still wet and she was rubbing it with a towel as she walked over to me. “What is it, Tenma? Ah! Don’t tell me you wanted to peek at me in the bathtub!”

“No—it’s something serious. Can you call Lily and Nelly over? I need to talk to you three.” I had a solemn look on my face. Milly’s expression tensed and then she went to go call her sisters over. A few minutes later, they came out and I told them about the weapons I’d found. “What do you guys think?”

“I definitely feel like that’s too many.”

“What if it’s just a coincidence? Maybe they just happened to have too many...”

“You really think a bunch of bandits could get their hands on that many brand-new weapons? Even if they all kept several to spare, there’d still be a ton left over.”

We talked about it and decided to record the number of weapons and report it to the guild. I’d planned to take a bath too, but for some reason the girls were vehemently opposed to it, so I had no choice but to boil water in a pot and use that water to wipe myself off with.

So much had happened that it was already almost dawn. We decided to take a short nap and then talk things over again. I woke up to the sound of my stomach growling. The sun was already high in the sky—judging by its position, it was probably just before noon.

I stretched my body a bit and then got out of the carriage, where I had slept. I’d been hesitant to sleep in the same house as the girls, so I slept out here by myself. Well—Shiromaru and Rocket were with me, so it wasn’t like I was alone. After I’d incapacitated Banza and his men, Rocket had stayed in my bag, but at some point Shiromaru had disappeared off on his own. He’d returned just before I went to sleep, though.

I tried going into the building, but no one was up yet. Even though it wasn’t really time for lunch yet, I decided to start getting it ready anyway. The menu was leftover soup from yesterday, bulked up with more water, jerky, and vegetables. I seasoned it with some salt and spices, then prepared the bread we’d bought in town. That should be enough for the other girls too.

Now that lunch was ready, I called out towards the house. The first to emerge wasn’t the triplets, but the girl who had served me tea yesterday at Banza’s house.

“I’m so sorry I was rude to you yesterday after you saved me.”

“It’s fine. Please don’t worry about it. It’s understandable, considering what you went through.” The girl told me that her name was Ceruna, and she was the daughter of the mayor of this village. After she apologized to me, I asked her what had happened here, although I felt terrible having to do so.

Ceruna hesitated for a moment. Then, with a pained expression on her face, she slowly told me the whole story. Apparently, Banza and his men had suddenly attacked the village in the middle of the night three weeks ago. There were only sixty villagers facing down one hundred bandits, so of course the bandits captured all of them.

Banza had divided the villagers up into two groups, one group with all the men and one group with all the women...and then his henchmen had slaughtered every last man in the village right in front of the women’s eyes. There were twenty-five women left. Thirteen of

them were older women, and Banza's men had killed all of them too. That left just twelve women, who Banza thought would fetch them a high price. But two of the women had been so devastated by the horrific things they'd witnessed that they couldn't bear what Banza had in store for them, so they'd bit off their tongues and died. After that, Banza had taken the rest of the women as slaves and put slave collars on them.

Ceruna lifted up her scarf and showed me her collar. The reason Banza had her serve tea to me was so that I wouldn't get suspicious about how there were no women around the village. Only approved slave traders in the kingdom were allowed to use such slave collars, but there were plenty of people in this world who were engaged in human trafficking—so much so that everyone said it was impossible to eradicate the practice completely.

The slave collars they wore had frightening effects upon those that wore them. They reminded me of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics: the slave must not injure its master, the slave must obey its master's orders, and the slave must protect its own existence as long as this does not conflict with the first and second rules.

If the slave tried to remove their collar, their bodies would be racked with pain, and in the worst case they could die. Basically, the collar couldn't be removed without permission from the slave's master. And only someone capable of using very powerful purification or curse-removal magic could remove it. But they still couldn't use this magic without permission from the slave's master, so if they tried to cast magic on the collar themselves they could be cursed or even end up dead.

There were several different types of slaves in this world: convict slaves, war slaves, common slaves, and illegal slaves. Convict slaves were just as the name would suggest—they'd committed a crime and were sentenced to be a slave for a set amount of time. Once that time expired, they were freed. The sentence could range from a few days to indefinitely, depending on the severity of their crimes.

War slaves were soldiers who had been captured as prisoners of war and turned into slaves. Many were people who'd been on the losing side of a war, but there were some who had gotten kidnapped during wars as well.

Common slaves were people who couldn't repay their debts, and had been sold instead. Many were turned into slaves so that their bodies could be sold, or to silence them. There were no sentence limits on common slaves, but sometimes their masters chose to set them free.

The last category was illegal slaves. These were people who had been kidnapped and sold illegally, against their wills. They could take

the people who'd sold them to court, and if the judge sided with them, they would be freed, and the people or business responsible for their enslavement would be punished. However, although they would have their collars removed during the trial while they were under strict supervision, if they lied during the trial, got themselves into terrible trouble, or tried to run away, they'd become convict slaves with indefinite sentences.

But it was very rare for an illegal slave to get to that point, and since they were difficult to discern from common slaves, it was unusual for them to be discovered. Most slaves you encountered were war slaves and common slaves. Convict slaves did hard labor like working in mines or quarries, so you wouldn't normally see them around town.

Slaves could be owned by the state (or king), by nobles with domains, by organizations, and by individuals. Convict slaves could only be held by domain lords who had received permission from the state and king, and their usage was specified.

War slaves and common slaves could be owned by anyone, regardless of age. But if the owner committed a crime or died, the rights to the slave would pass first to either the person who had killed the slave's master, or the person who had first discovered the slave.

After Ceruna explained all those details to me, she said the thing I was trying not to think about—"So until we are judged as having been illegal slaves, you will be our master, Tenma. Please take care of us."

To make matters worse, the triplets conveniently only heard the part where Ceruna declared I would be their master, and started firing questions at me in quick succession.

"Tenma! What's going on, meow?!"

"How dare you take advantage of these girls when they're vulnerable?!"

"You're such a pervert, Tenma! You lech!"

They blamed me in triplicate. Ceruna and I tried to calm them down, but to no avail—they were really out to get me. It took about ten minutes for them to finally calm down after we explained the situation to them.

I'd groveled on my hands and knees to apologize, and now the triplets were all hiding in a corner of the yard, absolutely mortified.

"Hey, girls! It's okay—just come on out and let's eat!" The three of them jerked in surprise, then hesitantly turned around. I tried to give them as gentle of a look as I could muster, then beckoned them over. It seemed to work, because at that point they slowly made their way back over to me. I handed them each a bowl of soup and a piece of bread, and we ate lunch together. Meanwhile, Ceruna took the rest of the soup into the house for the other girls; apparently they were all

going to eat inside.

Once the triplets and I were done eating, they'd finally started acting like their normal selves again. I waited until they were all settled before I said to them, "I think we should go back to town as soon as possible. What do you all think?"

"I don't think so, not if you consider the girls," Lily said, objecting.

"I agree with Lily. I think we should wait a little while first."

"Well, I think Tenma's right. We need to let the guild know about what happened here as soon as possible. Once we do that, we can turn our focus on freeing the slaves."

So Lily and Nelly disagreed with me, and Milly agreed. It seemed we were split down the middle. As I was wondering what we should do, all of a sudden Ceruna came over to us. "We've talked it over amongst ourselves, and we all agreed that we want to leave this town as soon as possible," she said hesitantly. "I know it might be a lot of trouble, but we want to get away from here as soon as we can. Being here brings back a lot of traumatic memories."

At those words, the two girls who'd opposed my plan relented and we all started getting ready to leave. I searched for something the girls could ride in, as well as a carriage for transporting the thieves. Luckily, I found four carriages, plus horses to pull them. I gave the girls the three sturdier carriages, and used the larger, slightly more rickety one for the bandits. I also cleaned out the carriage the girls would be riding in, and left the one that would be carrying the thieves dusty and dirty.

I'd almost forgotten about Banza, who was still tied to a tree. In the end I just threw him in the carriage with the rest of the bandits. I had bound the other thieves' arms and legs tightly so they couldn't misbehave.

I assigned one of the triplets to each carriage carrying the girls, and I took charge of driving the one with the bandits. Since the girls told us they had no desire to ever live in this village again, we gathered up everything of value from all the houses. We planned to sell the goods back in town, then distribute the money to the girls so they'd have something to live off of. The most valuable items there were the rest of the carriages and horses—I made sure not to forget those.

Finally, I put everything that we'd found in the warehouse into my bag. I had the triplets and Ceruna create an inventory and we checked off each item as it went into my bag. I had a feeling all these items had been obtained illegally, so this would make it easier to take stock of the items in case anything came up. Until then, the triplets and I would use them for battle.

It was just before evening by the time we'd finished all those tasks, but we decided to set out anyway. At last, it was time to leave. But just then, I realized that Shiromaru and Rocket weren't in my dimension bag. I used Detection to search the area and saw both of them coming towards us from the forest.

"What were you two doing?" I asked them. Rocket immediately slid over to me and part of his body split open, as if he were opening his mouth. Six dashboards fell out. The girls and I watched in stunned silence as he opened up another part of his body and spit out another boar, this one more than twice the size of the others.

I used Identify on this boar, and discovered it was a Rank C monster—a king dashboard. Physically, it looked like an ordinary dashboard, but it was more than three meters long and had tusks more than double the size of a normal dashboard's.

Rocket and Shiromaru looked incredibly proud of their catch. As for the girls, they looked shocked that Rocket, who was no more than sixty centimeters tall, could carry so many objects.

I put the dashboards in my magic bag, then petted Rocket and Shiromaru, praising them in turn. They happily accepted some dried meat as a reward, then hopped back into my dimension bag.

Part Five

We managed to get everything together and leave the village, although while we were on the road, there was another series of small incidents. Along the way, some of the bandits rolled out of the carriage they were riding in. Also, at some point, wolf-type monsters picked up on Shiromaru's scent and circled our party as we traveled. Still, we were able to keep going, and arrived back at Gunjo City just as the sun was setting.

I got out of the carriage and walked up to the gate. I recognized the guards that were standing there.

"I know it's time to close the gates, but could you wait for a few minutes?"

"We can't bend the rules, not even for the rising star of the adventurers' guild," said one of them with a smile.

"I know. But we went on a job to a village yesterday, and were attacked by a band of one hundred thieves at the village." I explained things as simply as I could to the guard.

Surprised by my words, he called over another guard, who immediately went to send a message to those in charge.

"I'm sorry, but we'll need proof confirming your account of this matter, and then another witness who can verify your statements."

"All right. Can you send a message to the guild too?" I asked. So he sent someone to go do that.

I went back to the carriage where the triplets were waiting, and told them about my exchange with the guard. They explained things to Ceruna, and she agreed to be our witness. Since she was the daughter of the mayor, she was the only surviving representative of the village, anyway. As for how to prove that a band of thieves had attacked us, I had all the prisoners along with Banza, not to mention the items we'd seized from the warehouse. Ceruna actually had relatives who lived in Gunjo City, so when we told the guards that, they had those individuals brought over as well.

About ten minutes later, we spotted someone running towards us. It was Flute, the vice-guildmaster. Flute was a small woman with a baby face, and it was easy to mistake her for a weak little girl at first glance, but she was strong and talented enough to lead the rough-and-tumble group that made up the adventurers' guild.

"Are you all right?!" she asked, panting. Apparently the only thing the messenger had told her was that we'd been attacked by bandits, and she was in a total panic.

We explained things to her, and once she understood, she scolded

the guard. "Get the message right next time!" Then she turned back to me. "I figured there was something odd about what they'd told me. I knew that a bunch of bandits could never get the best of you, Tenma!" She smiled wryly. Apparently she had a very high opinion of me.

We asked Flute what we should do about the weapons we'd found in the warehouse, as well as the slaves, Banza, and the surviving thieves. She said that technically we were entitled to the food, gems, and weapons, but if we were able to find their rightful owners, we should either return their items or pay an appropriate price for them. As for the slaves, a thorough investigation would be conducted to confirm their identities and ensure they were telling the truth. Once that was done, those who passed the investigation would be freed. As such, I would not be considered their owner, but the city or guild would still pay out the reward money. If, for some reason, some of the slaves could *not* be freed, then ownership rights would be transferred to me.

Finally, as for the thieves, I would be paid reward money for capturing them, and the bounty on their heads, if one had been levied. In addition, when they were sold as slaves, I would receive half of the proceeds. The guild would act as my representative for all the paperwork, so they would also take a cut.

"That's a pretty nice profit," Flute said with a smile. She was probably smiling because the guild also stood to gain a pretty penny from the situation.

Just then, a slave trader and an inquisitor (a person who could use the spell *Verify*, which was a spell that could determine whether or not someone was telling the truth) came over along with fifteen soldiers and five knights.

"Will the adventurer who captured these thieves come forward!" one of the knights bellowed. He was quite intimidating, but I was unfazed as I stepped forward.

I introduced myself. "I'm Tenma, the leader of the party which captured the thieves."

The knights began to shout at me. "Stop lying! The penalty for making false statements is very severe! Tell the truth!"

"I have no reason to lie. We're the ones who captured them."

"Yeah, right! We've been trying to arrest that Banza guy over there, but he was so elusive we were never even able to find him! There's no way a brat like you and three little girls could capture him!" a knight yelled back.

All the knights seemed to be of the same opinion, except for one. I was starting to get pretty angry with them myself. "Well, if a brat like me and three little girls managed to catch him, then you all must be pretty damned useless!" I said. At my words, their faces went scarlet

with anger. Regardless, I no longer wanted to deal with these idiot knights anymore. “I’m not going to hand the thieves over to you. I’m going to take them to a different town instead and explain the situation. Sorry for wasting your time. You can go ahead and return to your duties now,” I said derisively, turning on my heel.

“You fool! Do you want to die?!”

I looked back at them. “You lot couldn’t even catch Banza—do you really think you can take on a party that subdued him *and* a hundred thieves?”

Letting their anger take control, the knights drew their swords, rushing towards me. However, the one knight who had remained silent thus far spoke up. “Stop this at once! You all should be ashamed of yourselves as knights!” I could tell by the sound of her voice that she was a woman.

“So the captain finally speaks? Don’t you think it’s a little late? I was about to wipe these knights off the face of this planet,” I said icily. A palpable shiver went through the knights, including the woman who had spoken.

“You knew I was the captain? I was trying to hide that fact from you.”

“I could tell right away. You’re different from the others.” I didn’t mention that it was actually just a hunch.

“I see. I apologize for the rudeness of my men. Please don’t be so reckless about inviting trouble, though.”

“That depends on who I’m dealing with,” I retorted. From my perspective, I was the one who had been needlessly made a fool of, so I had nothing to feel bad about.

“Fine, then. I don’t feel as strongly as they do, but I have to admit it *is* strange. How in the world did just the four of you manage to defeat a hundred bandits?” she asked.

“I don’t know how else to prove it to you, besides showing you just a *glimpse* of my powers.” The knights all stood at the ready. “Ahh, don’t worry. I have no intention of hurting you...unless you want me to.”

I took a golem core out of my bag and began to create golems, some distance away from us. I summoned ten large ones, thirty medium-sized ones, and about thirty small ones. I could have made more, but I figured that would be sufficient.

From my other bag, I called out Shiromaru, who had been watching the proceedings. When the knights saw the golems, they were stunned. When they saw Shiromaru, however, they panicked.

“This is how I fight. Shiromaru—the wolf over there—is currently a very powerful Rank A monster.”



The moment they heard what Shiromaru's monster rank was, one of the knights drew his sword. It was probably a reflexive action, but Shiromaru took it as a threat. He was about to pounce on the knight, but I quickly grabbed his tail and stopped him.

"Awoooo!" he yelped. I soothed him, then glared at the knight. They were all lying on the ground in shock, except for their captain. It was pretty pathetic, but I could understand. After all, if a huge wolf jumped at you, even if it wasn't a Rank A monster, you'd be pretty scared, knight or not.

"Y-You bastard! Don't you know that's an act of hostility?!" one of the knights screamed, still on the ground.

"I think you're mistaken. *You're* the ones who drew your swords at us. Not only that, but we're not even in the city right now. This was purely an act of self-defense!" I yelled back. Responding to my anger, Shiromaru started to howl. It was so hostile, it sounded like he was a punk saying, "I can take you anytime, anywhere!" But it was pretty effective so I let him do it.

"Will you all knock it off?! Listen, I'm sorry I doubted you—but can you please put the wolf away?" This sounded more like an order than a request, but I obliged. I sent Shiromaru back to my bag and retrieved the golem cores. Once the knights saw how Shiromaru obeyed me, their mouths hung open in stunned silence.

While they were still dumbfounded, a man who said he was Ceruna's uncle appeared. He was assistant to the Gunjo City council accountant, so he was well known. Now that he had arrived, the inquisitor began to examine each of the women. They all passed, so the slave trader removed their collars. The girls didn't want to go near him, but there were no female slave traders in this city, so they just had to bear with it as they waited for their collars to be taken off. Once they were freed, they were taken directly to the hospital, but Ceruna stayed behind as our witness.

"Now, what will you do about the thieves?" I asked.

Before the captain could answer, Flute spoke up. "Banza is worth 200,000G. Two of these thieves have a bounty of more than 50,000G on their heads apiece. Just those three are worth over 300,000G. Not only that, but there are twenty-three of them that will become convict slaves, fetching 100,000G each. Let's see... Half of 2,300,000G is 1,150,000G. So taking the reward money into account, we'll be paying Tenma and his party at least 1,450,000G."

"Flute, I also killed seventy-five thieves and have their bodies in my bag. What do you want me to do with them?" I asked.

"That many?!" she exclaimed. "Well, if you can prove they belonged to Banza's band, then the reward for killing each one is

10,000G. We collected all thieves with bounties on their heads, but you will still get a reward for them. That's a profit of 2,200,000G just for the thieves," she laughed.

Flute might have been smiling, but the knights didn't look very thrilled. That payment would be temporarily coming out of their budget. Even if it was temporary, it would take several months for their budget to recover, so it would be tough for them to make do in the meantime.

"And what should we do about the other loot and the weapons?" I said, in an intentionally loud voice so the knights could hear.

Flute crossed her arms and thought. "There are two small treasure boxes, one hundred forty-six swords, one hundred thirty-two spears, one hundred thirty bows, and twelve thousand two hundred arrows, correct? This is just a rough calculation, but I'm sure the treasure will go for more than 20,000,000G. The weapons were of fairly good quality. One sword would be 5,000G, so 730,000G total. Spears are 8,000G apiece, so 1,056,000G total. 2,000G apiece for the bows for a total of 26,000G. 20G apiece for the arrows, so 244,000G. Add that all up, and you'd have around 2,290,000G. However, if you auction off the gems in the royal capital, you could get much more for them." She rattled that off like she'd tallied it all up beforehand, as opposed to it being a calculation she'd done on the spot.

"W-Wait a minute!" the captain objected.

"Yes?" I replied.

"There's no way that we can pay that much money right away! Can't we pay later?"

"You can pay for just the thieves now. I can sell the weapons elsewhere," I said, making it clear that I wouldn't accept a deferred payment.

"You should know how much this is going to hurt the Gunjo City Knights!"

"And what does your budget have to do with me?"

The captain seemed upset with me now. I knew that I was in the right, but deep down inside, I realized that maybe I was taking out past frustrations on them. I kept thinking about the soldiers from before—from three years ago, even though I knew these knights had nothing to do with those guys. Still, when they took that superior attitude towards me, I couldn't help but remember those cowardly soldiers who'd abandoned Kukuri Village. I just couldn't control my emotions. Once I'd regained my composure a little and looked around, I noticed that the triplets looked a little scared. Seeing that made me take a few deep breaths to calm myself down further.

"First of all, let me make some things clear. In this matter, you are not our equals. We have the upper hand here, of course."

“You bastard!”

“Shut up!” The captain scolded the knight who’d yelled at me.
“I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“We didn’t set out for this to happen. But it did, and as a result, we ended up cleaning up your mess.” I spoke firmly, looking around at the knights. “Banza and his men had been in that village for *three weeks*. And in that time, they killed nearly all of its residents. Because *you* couldn’t catch him. It might have just been a coincidence because we were the ones who took that job, but we killed a great deal of them and captured the rest. Despite all of that, you looked down on us and tried to make fools of us. Why would I want to make a deal with people like that? We have the right to choose to deal with you—we’re not required to by any means.” I let my words make it clear that they shouldn’t have any misconceptions.

Apparently it had taken this long for the knights to realize I was angry, although it still wasn’t enough to make them change their attitudes.

“The knights are the ones who protect this city! It’s only natural that you’d cooperate with us!”

“If you can’t pay, then there’s no need for me to do so. I’m telling you that I’ll only cooperate with people who can pay me.” I spelled it right out for them, since they still weren’t coming off their high horses.

“What is your goal here?” the captain asked me.

“I don’t have one. I’m just saying I won’t do a one-sided deal with someone I don’t trust. That’s business. And the foundations of business are fair trade and trust.”

“What can we do to make you trust us?”

Now I was getting a little exasperated. I didn’t know if she was from a wealthy family or what, but I was definitely missing some important information here. I let out a sigh. “First of all, *who are you?*” I asked, starting with the basics.

“Huh???” she blurted out, dumbfounded.

“You haven’t told me your name, your affiliation, your rank, or what kind of jurisdiction you have here. I think those are all necessary for me to know before I do business with someone.”

“That’s it? That’s...” she trailed off. Perhaps she was thinking, *That’s the reason you don’t want to do business with us?*

It might not have been a big deal to her, but it was to me. “That’s not all, of course. Another reason is because your men looked down on us and tried to make fools of us. There’s no advantage for me to do business unconditionally with you just because you’re knights.” The captain kept staring at me with a dumb look on her face, so I continued. “Not only that, but it’s absolutely ridiculous to ask me for

deferred payment without even telling me who you are. What if you're trying to swindle me? I'd have no recourse."

That finally got through to her and she turned red. "I would never try to swindle anyone!" she yelled.

I ignored her reaction. "Unless you tell me who you are, I won't do business with you. Because until then, you're doing the same thing Banza was doing." After I drew that analogy, she finally realized that what she was doing was the same as what a swindler would do. Now she blushed for a different reason, and bowed her head.

"Do you understand yet? No one in their right mind would want to do business with someone who insulted them and might even be out to deceive them."

The captain was still looking down, but one of the other knights spoke up. "You bastard! That's insubordination! I'll have your head!" he yelled, drawing his sword.

"Wait! Wait! We're the ones at fault here! And if you hurt him, you'll turn the adventurers' guild against us!" The captain held back the knight who had his sword drawn.

Flute piped up, "She's right. If you injure the rising star of the adventurers' guild over something so ridiculous, word will spread like wildfire to every guild on this continent. And then every guild will pull out of this city, and none of them will come here again. You know what that means, don't you?" she said ominously.

She meant, of course, that if the adventurers left the city, businesses would close and the city would become more unsafe. Adventurers were jacks-of-all-trades, in the best and worst senses of the word, but they played a large part in keeping the economy afloat and maintaining peace in the city.

Once that had sunk in, the color drained from the faces of the knights in the most pathetic way. If something like that happened and it was their fault, they couldn't pay for it even with their heads.

"So...now that I've explained all that, let me ask you again. Who are you?"

"I-I'm the captain of the fourth knights brigade of Gunjo City, Primera von Sanga. I've been given full authority to deal with this matter." The captain stood straight as a pin as she introduced herself.

"Sanga?" There was a duchy with the same name, so I quickly used Identify on her.

Name: Primera von Sanga

Age: 20

Class: Human

Title: Third daughter of Duke Sanga, Captain of the fourth brigade of the Gunjo City Knights

I'd been right after all. "So you are a rich girl."

"I am the third daughter of a duke, so yes..."

"I see. Well? What will you do, then?" I asked breezily.

"Um, what do you mean?"

"The deal. If you won't agree, then I'll go somewhere else."

"So you'll do business with us, then?" she asked hopefully. Her tone of voice and her attitude were wildly different from before.

"If you'll pay the bounties and write the bonds, and split up the deferred payments, then I'll agree. I'm considering the gemstones separately, though."

"But we need the gemstones..." she objected.

"Can you pay for them? They're worth more than 20,000,000G. And I can get even more for them if I sell them at an auction," I said firmly, making it clear I wouldn't budge.

"All right. But can you wait a while before putting them up for sale? I want to confer with my father—with Duke Sanga first." She relented, her shoulders slumping.

"Fine. I'll need an answer within ten days. The deadline for the auction is coming up soon." I was sure the guild could probably sell the gems for me, but I wanted an answer as soon as possible so I could figure out what to do next.

Now that everything was settled, Flute acted as the guild's representative and we exchanged contracts. They paid 4,500,000G for the thieves' bounties, the convict slaves, the weapons, and for rescuing Ceruna and the other girls. The 500,000G bounty would be paid immediately and the rest would be paid in installments; I'd receive 2,000,000G in two months, and then another 200,000,000 in another two months.

"I'll hand over the thieves' bodies now. Where do you want them?" I asked.

"We'll take the captured slaves away now, but you can put the bodies in front of the knights' headquarters." I figured they wouldn't want a pile of dead bodies just lying out in the open.

I agreed, so I went over to the carriage to get Banza and the other bandits, but when they realized it was me they completely freaked out. The knights were equally disturbed, yelling, "They're convulsing! They're pissing themselves!"

They said Banza would receive the death penalty, and the other bandits would probably be sent to work in the mines. But they made it clear they couldn't let Banza live after what he'd done.

Now that all that was settled, Ceruna and a man walked over to me.

"Thank you so much for saving Ceruna. I am Marks, her uncle,"

the man introduced himself politely. I wished the knights had been even half—or a quarter—as polite as he was.

According to Flute, this Marks was the younger brother of Ceruna's mother and had joined the city council to serve as the assistant to the accountant. He'd made it to his position without using any personal connections, and was quite good at his work.

"It was just a coincidence that we were there."

"Still, the end result was that you saved her!" He thanked me again, bowing his head over and over until Ceruna stopped him.

After that, he finally withdrew because he intended to take Ceruna to the doctor, but before he left he said, "Please let me know if there's anything at all I can help you with."

Afterwards, I headed to the knights' headquarters to sign the contracts. Flute came with me as my witness. They told me to put the bodies in a corner of the training grounds. Once they saw the mountain of frozen corpses, several of the knights threw up on the spot while several more ran for the bathroom.

I'd made sure that no one who saw the bodies and who was able to use Ice magic could undo the spell, so we wouldn't have to worry about the bodies rotting. Ice magic was pretty high level anyway, so I doubted any of those present would be capable of using it. After I finished taking out the bodies, I signed three copies of the contract with Flute as my witness: one for me, one for the guild, and one for the knights.

After I left the knights' headquarters, all I had to do was drop by the guild. However, since it was late, we decided to take care of that the next day. We all went back to our respective inns for the night.

I walked into the Full Belly Inn and was immediately greeted by Dozle. Apparently the tavern was closed tonight. "Oh, you came back in one piece, Tenma! I heard all kinds of stories—you defeated a band of thieves all by yourself, and you threatened the knights too?"

Apparently the truth had gotten rather embellished, so as I was checking in I set him straight.

"Here's your key." He handed me the key to the room I'd been staying in before. "You sure came back fast, though. I thought you wouldn't be back for a few more days, so I hadn't even cleaned your room yet."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I can clean it myself. I'll be leaving again in about ten days," I said, telling him about the auction.

"Wow, you sure made a good profit! That must be unheard of for a rookie like you!" He sounded surprised.

Hearing the commotion, Kanna poked her head in. "That's enough, dear. Tenma just got home," she scolded her husband. Then she turned to me and said, "Welcome back, Tenma. If you don't mind

leftovers, I can make you some dinner.”

“I’d appreciate that, thanks.”

Kanna graciously fixed me dinner. She said it was leftovers, but she also made me some herb-roasted chicken. Shiromaru was thrilled about it, so I made a note to ask her for the recipe so I could try making it later. I was sure Dozle would give it up if I brought him some good alcohol.

With my stomach full from dinner, I started to feel sleepy, so I decided to go back to my room. “I’m gonna go ahead and turn in for the night. Goodnight, Dozle. Night, Kanna.”

“All right. Good night.”

“Sweet dreams.”

They said good night to me and I headed up to my usual room. When I walked in, it really felt like I was home. I could feel myself relaxing.

“This feels more like mental exhaustion than physical exhaustion... I’ll turn in now, and then take a bath tomorrow.” The local baths opened early in the morning to accommodate the people who worked nights. “Night, Shiromaru. Night, Rocket.” I opened my bag and called to them, but all I could hear in response was Shiromaru snoring. I laughed and closed up the bag, then got into bed.

Part Six

The next day, I woke up to find Shiromaru and Rocket right in my face. Half of Shiromaru's body hung out of the bag as he peered at me.

"Morning, you two. What's up?" I asked. Then I heard a loud noise coming from Shiromaru's stomach. "All right, I'll get you some food." They both went into the bag. I chuckled and changed, then quickly headed out to the yard.

I decided to make Shiromaru a plant-based breakfast this morning. Rocket was happy, but Shiromaru wasn't thrilled about it. He kept glancing at me, but then he finally gave up and ate the vegetables.

I had breakfast myself, then decided to head over to the guild. I asked Dozle to make my breakfast plant-based as well. I had a feeling Shiromaru wouldn't be too happy with me otherwise.

Even though it was before lunch when I got to the guild, it was still as noisy in there as ever. But the instant I walked in you could hear a pin drop. Occasionally I could hear people whispering about Banza, but no one came up and talked to me directly. I ignored them and went straight to the bulletin board to look at the job postings.

I found a special job to get rid of some rockbirds on a mountain about half a day from the city. A special job was usually a request to defeat a certain monster. There were no rank requirements, so any fully registered guild member was eligible, and the job was valid for as long as it was posted. You didn't even need to file an application.

According to the post, there had been an increase in rockbirds in the area after their mating season and they wanted someone to come reduce their numbers before they started doing real damage.

Rockbirds, as their name suggested, had wings as hard as rocks, so normal weapons couldn't do any damage to them. They were easily larger than one meter, with a wingspan of three meters. They resembled normal birds and were good fliers, so it was hard to defeat them solo.

But their wings could be made into armor and weapons, and you could eat their meat, which was delicious and had little fat. It was especially popular with women.

And of course, you couldn't forget their eggs. They were rich and highly nutritious, and could be sold for more by the gram than the birds themselves. The shells were thick and strong, so they could be used for processed goods.

There was a 1,000G reward for killing one bird, and whoever defeated them could keep the materials. It sounded like a good job. I

decided to head out tomorrow to do it. I looked to see if there were any other jobs worth doing, but none caught my attention as much as the rockbird job. Then, Flute noticed I was there and called me over.

“Tenma, can you come over here for a moment?” The people around us looked up eagerly, but when they saw that neither of us seemed excited, they quickly lost interest.

“Is something the matter?” I walked over to the counter. She showed me into a back room, then had me sit down in a chair.

“Congratulations. You’ve been promoted to Rank C,” she said, clapping her hands.

I paused, then blurted out dumbly, “Huh?”

“I used magic to contact the guildmaster in the capital regarding Banza, and I was told to promote you. So now it’s official!”

“Isn’t this a little bit too easy? What about the test?” I asked, in disbelief that everything was going so smoothly.

“That’s not a problem. The guildmaster has granted special permission. It’s not a matter of showing favoritism either. There is precedent for such matters.” She went on to explain which precedent she meant.

Apparently, when a certain adventurer from a noble family was just starting out, he had captured a criminal who had a bounty on his head, maintaining safety in the city. This criminal was very strong and was involved in a conspiracy, so the adventurer was given special permission to be promoted from Rank E to Rank C. Ever since then, the guildmaster had the right to present any adventurer who accomplished a similar feat with a promotion...but only up to Rank C.

So that was why I’d been allowed to get promoted to that very rank.

“To be honest, I wouldn’t have a problem with you getting promoted to Rank B, after all you’ve done,” Flute said with a laugh.

“I gratefully accept the promotion.” I handed her my guild card. Apparently she would give me a new one.

After I left the room, I saw that the triplets were here too. They were surrounded by some other adventurers (mostly male), so I just kept a watchful eye over them. I had a feeling that if I said anything, it would just be asking for trouble.

Flute spotted them too, however, and said, “Lily, Nelly, Milly. Tenma is waiting for you,” in a loud voice. The girls’ ears perked up immediately, and they made their way past the adventurers over to me. Several of the men glared at me from behind them. Meanwhile, Flute was smiling. *She did that on purpose!*

“Morning, Tenma!”

“Sorry, did you wait long?”

“Sorry we kept you waiting!”

The three of them greeted me.

“I got here early because I had something to take care of,” I said.

They replied all at once, “You’re supposed to say you just got here!” and, “Or that you got here early because you couldn’t wait to see us!” It sounded like they wanted a scene out of a shojo manga.

I wanted to ask them what kind of person they thought I was, but I knew it was better to just ignore it. If I indulged them too much, their glaring fan club would start to curse me with blood pouring out of their eyes.

“Come over here. I want to talk to you about a job.” I led them into the room I’d just come out of. I sat in the chair, and they took the couch.

Flute sat across from the three of them. “I’d like to apologize on behalf of the guild for all the trouble you went through,” she said, bowing her head. We told her they couldn’t have known, but she continued, “Normally we thoroughly vet all job postings except for in emergencies. In other words, the client is required to fill out paperwork verifying their identity. In this case, there was insufficient information in the documents.” She explained that the person who’d processed this job posting was new and inexperienced, so that was why it had slipped through the cracks. “So as an apology, we’d like to increase your payment for the job, along with a nuisance settlement of 10,000G.” She set a bag full of 15,000G in front of us.

“Is this hush money?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Of course not. I’m going to post this statement on the boards inside the guild as well. It really is genuinely a nuisance settlement.” She smiled sheepishly. Under normal circumstances she probably would have tried to hide it, but since the whole story had played out in front of the city gates with a lot of people bearing witness, she would lose the trust of people if she’d tried to sweep it under the rug.

“I’m sorry.” I bowed my head.

“It’s not your fault, Tenma. The knights were the ones who caused problems this time,” Flute said graciously.

After that, we discussed the details of what had happened at that village, and then the meeting was over. Once we’d left the room, the triplets and I decided to divvy up our payment. We found an empty table inside the guild and sat down. The girls told me it would be safer to divide the money up here within the guild, rather than doing it outside.

I tried to divide up the payment evenly between the four of us, but the triplets refused. They said that we’d taken on this job as two separate parties: Tenma and Followers, and then the Wildcat Princesses, so according to them, the money should be split in half

along those lines. I didn't really agree with this, but they said, "If just the Wildcat Princesses had taken the job, we definitely would've failed and who knows what would've happened to us!" So in the end, I decided to take the money.

That wasn't all—apparently, the dashboards that Shiromaru and Rocket had hunted belonged solely to me. However, I decided to give them three boards anyway. At first, they were reluctant, but since the boards had been killed during the mission, I insisted that they had equal rights to the carcasses. I basically had to force them to accept, and they finally relented.

Afterwards, we had lunch together. Then we used the butchering area in the back of the guild to carve up the boards. Normally you had to reserve the area, but it just so happened to be unoccupied, so we were able to use it for three hours at 3,000G per hour. Professional butchers were there to help as well, at no extra cost. It was worth having their assistance so you didn't make a mistake and ruin a perfectly good carcass.

We had seven boards in total, including the king dashboard. Thanks to the butchers' help, we had all of them butchered in two and a half hours. We gave the butchers a portion of the meat and organs to thank them for their help, which they happily accepted. Apparently it was very unusual to get your hands on fresh dashboard meat, so although butchering them was a pain, it was worth it in the end.

The triplets sold all the organs and most of the meat to a butcher in town they knew, and intended to have the rest for supper. They sold the furs and tusks to the guild. I did the same, with the exception of a few bones from the boards, which I kept for Shiromaru.

Because I possessed a magic bag, I decided not to sell the meat. After I had the materials appraised, I learned the spoils we got from the king board sold for much higher than those from regular boards. In particular, the fur sold for five times more than the fur of a regular board. Normally that would have made me happy, but I'd already received so much money from getting rid of the bandits that when I heard the total, all I thought was, *That's it?*

Afterwards, I said goodbye to the triplets in front of the guild. It was too late to go do anything together, so I thought now would be a good chance to take care of something I'd had on my mind for a while.

I went out the town gates and walked awhile until I got to a flat, grassy area. Then I called Shiromaru.

"Shiromaru, sit!" I commanded.

"Woof!"

Then I took something out of my bag. At once, Shiromaru tried to run away.

“Shiromaru, stay!”

“Awooo...”

He started whining pitifully as he stared at the bar of handmade soap I was holding. Ignoring him, I used Water magic to wet his fur. He couldn't stand it, but he still obeyed my commands. Once his whole body was wet, I rubbed the soap over his fur to lather him up. After thirty minutes, he was a big ball of bubbles. I rinsed him off with water, once again revealing his pitiful face. I spent ten more minutes rinsing his fur thoroughly, and then I was done.

Now all he had to do was dry off, a process which he really enjoyed. And as a result of that process, I got soaked myself. Then Shiromaru tried to slink away, but I said, “Shiromaru, stay!”



He sat down, holding himself straighter than usual. I slowly walked around to his front. The moment I got near him, though, he flopped over and showed me his belly.

“What are you doing, Shiromaru?!”

He continued to roll around on the ground and the next time he sat up, he’d become a brown wolf. He had no idea what he’d just done, and then he got to become a big ball of bubbles again.

The whole ordeal took much longer than I had expected, and it was after sunset by the time I finally got back to the inn. Shiromaru was exhausted, asleep in my bag after all that commotion.

“Hey, Tenma. Welcome back. Hm? Are you wearing different clothes than from when you left?” Dozle asked me.

I told him what happened with Shiromaru and he burst out laughing. Hearing the commotion, Kanna came out to see what was going on. Dozle told her why he was laughing and she started laughing too. On top of that, all the regular guests who were there overheard my story and began to laugh as well. That was when I decided to send Shiromaru to bed with no supper that night.

The first thing I heard the next morning when I woke up was the sound of Shiromaru’s stomach growling. He was peering right into my face. Since I hadn’t given him dinner the night before, he was incredibly hungry. He sat down beside me, staring.

“Morning, Shiromaru. Are you hungry?”

“Woof!” he barked cheerfully. Drool dripped from his mouth.

Once I finished changing, I headed out to the yard. There were several guests from the inn gathered around the well, so I couldn’t take Shiromaru out of my bag yet. Instead, I washed my face and decided to head outside the town.

There was a cool breeze blowing as I left. I walked away from the gates for a while, then let Shiromaru and Rocket out of the bag. Their breakfast was to be the boar meat from the day before—I prepared it for them, using Fire magic to roast it.

It was some bone-in thigh meat. Even though it was fifteen kilograms in total, Shiromaru chowed down and devoured it in moments. I thought it wasn’t healthy to only give him meat, so I gave him some vegetables too. He also devoured those, which was unusual for him.

After he was finished, I roasted some meat for myself and ate it between two slices of bread. Shiromaru didn’t show any interest in my food since he’d just eaten so much, but Rocket did. He slid in front of me and begged for some bread.

Since I was already at it, I decided to roast enough meat for today’s lunch as well. I put it on a plate and stashed it in my magic

bag. The smell of roasting meat must have drawn the attention of the guard at the gate because he was looking in my direction, but I pretended not to notice.

It was still pretty early when I finished getting lunch ready, but I was planning on going to hunt those rockbirds, so I took Valley Wind out of my bag and had Rocket go inside of it. I decided to let Shiromaru run free for a change so I let him out of the bag as well.

As for me, I could go anywhere and do anything as long as I had enough food, since my bag was fully equipped with everything else I needed. And I'd just prepared my food, so I was good to go.

I put a bridle and reins on Valley Wind, and adjusted its stirrups. I mounted it and called out to Shiromaru, since we were ready to go. Then we were off.

I gave instructions to Valley Wind to start moving forward. It was just like riding a regular horse. However, if I made it go too fast, it would run out of mana, so I had to keep replenishing its mana at regular intervals. It wouldn't run out of mana as long as I didn't keep it running all day, though.

I had Valley Wind canter as we traveled. Shiromaru ran alongside us, but sometimes he'd go up ahead or take a detour; he was free to roam around. We passed several merchants and travelers along the way. They were surprised when they saw Valley Wind, and scared when they saw Shiromaru. I apologized to each one before moving on.

Not even two hours later, we arrived at the mountain. Supposedly the rockbirds lived halfway up the mountain, so I'd ridden Valley Wind as far as the base of the mountain and then decided to go the rest of the way on foot.

I put Valley Wind back in my bag and took a short break, then started hunting. I gave Detection a try and noticed several pings around us, but most of them belonged to deer and rabbits, with the occasional boar. I didn't see any of the rockbirds in question.

I decided they must not be in this area, so I focused on scaling the mountain. About two hours later, I finally entered the rockbirds' territory. I began to stumble across feathers and bird poop. Using Detection again, I got two pings about a hundred meters ahead. I snuck up closer and spotted two rockbirds on top of a tree. It looked like there was a nest up there.

I set my sights on them from about fifty meters away and shot off two Air Bullets. Each bullet struck one bird in the head, knocking them out of the tree. Shiromaru raced towards them, with Rocket riding on his back and me following behind. Shiromaru picked up the rockbirds in his mouth, and after I made sure they were dead, I put them in my bag.

After that, I climbed the tree to check the nest. There were two

eggs inside.

“Ooh, what luck! There’s two of them!”

Most rockbirds only laid one egg at a time, and many of them were small. But these two eggs were quite large and their shells looked tough. That must have meant that their parents had a lot of mana or a highly nutritious diet. These eggs were about twenty-five centimeters long, with a circumference of twenty centimeters, and weighed about three kilograms. They were about as big as ostrich eggs, or maybe even larger. Normal rockbird eggs were slightly smaller than this.

I put the eggs in my bag and destroyed the nest. Rockbird nests marked their territory, so once it was destroyed, it made it easier for another rockbird to build a new nest there.

“All right—there’s another ping two hundred meters up ahead!”

I kept hunting in that fashion for about three hours, and I ended up killing twenty rockbirds and getting thirteen eggs. *That should be enough*, I thought. I decided to call it a day. There still seemed to be some rockbirds around, but I figured other adventurers would probably come too, so I should probably stop for now.

Once I was finished hunting, though, I took my sword out of my bag, and told Rocket and Shiromaru to get ready to fight at any moment. Why? Because someone had been following us for about an hour now. There were five of them, actually. I hadn’t checked their genders or classes yet, but it was quite possible that they were up to no good.

Sword in hand, I walked slowly back down the mountain, and they followed me. They definitely were up to no good.

Once I reached the foot of the mountain, I started to sprint. This sudden change in behavior seemed to fluster them. I ran all the way to a flat, grassy area with good visibility and then came to a stop. There, I took Valley Wind out of my bag, put Rocket inside, and waited. I had Shiromaru wait in the forest on purpose, with directions to sneak up behind our five stalkers.

A few minutes later, they showed themselves. Three men, two women. Humans. One of the men stepped forward.

“Hey, kid. Why’d you run away?”

“Why were you following me through the forest?” I countered.

They hesitated. Apparently they hadn’t expected me to have realized that.

“You didn’t think I’d noticed? You guys are terrible at tailing someone.”

Their skills were pretty shabby. Even though they’d kept their distance, since there were five of them, they’d been pretty loud. They hadn’t bothered to hide themselves at all—it was almost like they’d

wanted to be discovered.

“Who cares? Give us all the rockbirds in your bag!”

“Yeah, and the horse too!” another one added, and then they all laughed.

One of the girls, noticing that I was silent, said in a cocky voice, “The fur from that white wolf that was with him looked pretty nice too.”

“Yeah, maybe we should take him too. I’d love to skin him up and wear his fur.”

I rolled my eyes and called past them. “Did you hear that, Shiromaru? Whaddya think?”

At that moment, Shiromaru, who was about ten meters behind them, began to growl, charging at them. The two women went flying with a loud THUMP! One sailed through the air, while the other rolled towards the men like a bowling ball. Shiromaru had taken out all five of them in one hit.

I took a closer look. They weren’t dead, but they had a lot of broken bones and serious injuries. I gave a light kick to the man who’d spoken to me first to wake him up. “So? What’d you want from me again?”

The man writhed around on the ground. “You bastard... Don’t you know who I am?!”

“No!” I punched him in the face, knocking him out. I rifled through his pockets, but I didn’t find a guild card. At any rate, I decided to tie them up and consult with the guild about what to do with them. On the way back, I hooked Valley Wind up to the carriage and threw the five of them inside. I suppose it would have been more correct to say it was more like a large, two-wheeled wagon than a carriage. It didn’t have a covered top, so anyone could see what I was doing. I had tied them all up together and gagged them. Then I hung little placards around their necks, which read respectively:

“I tried to steal loot and got beat”

“I got KO’d before I even said one word”

“I’m sorry for attacking you”

“I became a human bowling ball and knocked out three of my allies”

“I flew through the air like a bird”

On the way back to Gunjo City, I took several breaks along the

way, and people passing by would point and laugh. A few asked what happened, and I politely explained the details to them. Since I took my sweet time going back home, it was past 7 p.m. by the time I arrived—much later than I'd planned.

I explained the situation to the guards and then headed towards the guild, Valley Wind and all. As I passed, I heard the guard mutter, "Not again..."



As soon as I arrived at the guild, I called out to a worker who happened to be outside to ask Flute to come talk to me. A few moments later Flute appeared. "I was just about to go home!" she said. She seemed a little mad. "All right—I understand what happened. I'll have the inquisitor take over for you and these five. Then we'll decide how to deal with the situation."

Just then, the prisoners started making muffled noises. Flute removed their gags, at which point one said, "Why do we have to go to the inquisitor?! We're the victims here!" The other four of them nodded in agreement. "That kid's white wolf attacked us from behind and stole our rockbirds!" The man was getting more and more agitated, which just stirred the rest of them up as well.

"Otherwise, how would a kid like him have hunted so many rockbirds?!"

"Yeah!" the others agreed. After everyone watching looked over at me, they turned back to stare at the men with exasperated looks on their faces. The prisoners didn't seem to notice, however, and continued their impassioned argument.

"Then how did you kill these rockbirds?" I asked them.

"A bow! With a bow and arrow!" he answered.

So I took out all the rockbirds and spread them out on the ground. "Flute! Everyone! Look at the heads of these rockbirds!" I held up one to demonstrate. "Every single one of them was killed with magic. There's not one arrow wound on them. Check for yourself if you don't believe me."

Flute went down the row and inspected all the rockbirds. The onlookers did the same.

"He's telling the truth. There's a clean wound in each of their heads. An arrow would've left jagged marks around the wounds."

"Wow—those wounds really are clean! They must've died instantly without any stress. That means their meat will taste even better."

"Not only that, but the wounds are in the exact same place on all of the birds. That would be incredibly difficult to achieve unless you were using high-class magic."

Everyone agreed, and the prisoners' faces went pale.

"It seems like we don't even need to take this case to the inquisitor. Do you have any objections?" Flute directed this question to the prisoners, but they didn't answer. "Tenma. Do you want them to pay a fine, or will you sell them as slaves? The lowest amount one can be fined for theft is 100,000G, but since this was an especially egregious theft, it's possible to fine them more than double that. And of course, that's per person. If you decide they will be punished with slavery, you will become their owners."

Flute seemed to be in a very bad mood. I could hear the irritation in her voice. *Maybe I should bring her something nice sometime.*

"I have to decide their punishment?"

"Yes, that's right. This incident is a theft, and you are the victim. Thieves do not have human rights."

"Wait a second here! My father is a noble! Do you have any idea what you're doing?!" one of the men boasted.

"So what?" I answered. I already knew that about him, because I'd used Identify on him previously.

Name: Guise

Age: 23

Class: Human

Title: Second son of an honorary aristocrat
(baronet), wannabe thief

Since he was the son of an "honorary" aristocrat, that meant he wasn't a real noble anyway. Plus, his other title was "wannabe thief"—this guy was a total mess.

"I-I'm a noble! I'm different from you people!" he screamed.

I looked at him. "Honorary nobles hold the title for one generation only. That means you're nothing but a wannabe thief!"

He turned bright red. "My dad is friends with Duke Sanga!"

Now he was name-dropping. "Flute, can you have someone go to the knights' headquarters and tell them Tenma would like to see the captain of the fourth knights brigade? I have something important I need to discuss with her father," I said.

Flute nodded, and sent a messenger to the headquarters right away. The man had a smug look on his face, but everyone watching who knew the captain of Gunjo City's fourth knights brigade had sympathetic looks on their faces.

About ten minutes later, Primera ran up, panting. "Tenma! Is something the matter, sir?!" For some reason she was speaking very politely to me.

I greeted her and then said, "Thanks for coming. There's a bit of a

problem here involving your family, Captain.” I explained everything in the order in which it had happened, and the further I got into the story, the sharper the look on Primera’s face became.

“Hey, Lady Knight! My dad’s a noble and this brat over here attacked me! That’s insubordination! Let me go!” This guy really didn’t know how to read the room.

Primera turned towards him. She’d pasted a smile onto her face, but if you looked closely at her, her temple was twitching. “I think I should probably introduce myself. I am the captain of the fourth brigade of the Gunjo City knights. My name is Primera von Sanga. The third daughter of the Duke of Sanga, of whom you speak.”

The man froze for a few moments. “Well then—that’ll make things go faster! My father is Duke Sanga’s—”

“Shut up!” Primera yelled furiously, startling both the man and everyone else watching. They were all visibly frightened now. “How *dare* a thief like you call himself a noble and use the name of a duke! *You* are the one guilty of insubordination! The penalty for that is death!” Her rage was on full display. The man was completely frozen from her menacing attitude.

Primera turned towards me. “Please allow the knights to take them into our custody.” She’d phrased it in the form of a request, but I could tell she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Sure. But I have first rights to them, so don’t forget that,” I said, as I agreed to turn them over.

After thanking me, Primera stood deep in thought for a few moments.

“Sorry, but can someone help me carry them?” she said.
Sometimes I thought she might be a bit of an airhead...

Part Seven

The next day, I slept until it was almost noon. I'd gotten to bed quite late the night before, since I'd had to help Primera transport the thieves to the knights' headquarters. I was just going to spend the day in town. But first, I needed to eat. I changed my clothes and looked into my bag. Shiromaru was gnawing on a boar bone.

"Hungry?" I asked, and he wagged his tail enthusiastically and yipped. I tossed in the leftover boar meat from yesterday and then headed down to the dining room, but...

"Tenma, breakfast is all gone. You were a little too late!" Dozle told me.

I let out a sigh and decided to go somewhere else. I bought some bread from a vendor outside the inn and ate it while I headed to the merchant's shop. It was about twenty minutes away from the inn, but it had the best selection of goods in the city.

I needed sugar, milk, and flour. I was craving something sweet. I thought I might as well stock up while I was there too. First, I'd get the sugar... Hm, it was a bit expensive. I guess it was fine since I had the money, though. *Ten kilograms should probably be enough.*

It was 1,500G just for the sugar. Next up was milk. Shiromaru drank it too, so twenty liters was probably good. That was 600G. Last was flour. Since it could be used for a variety of things, it was probably best to buy a lot of it. One hundred kilograms should be enough. It was 40G per kilogram, so that would be 4,000G in all.

My grand total was 6,100G. Sounded pretty normal for a standard shopping trip.

After I finished paying, I put all the items into my bag. The other customers watched enviously. As soon as I got back to the inn, I asked Dozle if I could borrow the kitchen. He wasn't doing anything at the moment, so he came with me.

"What are you gonna make, Tenma?" he asked with curiosity.

"Three types of desserts," I answered.

"Desserts! Are you gonna save some for me?" Having overheard our conversation, Kanna came over.

"Sure. I have plenty of ingredients."

"I can't wait!" she said, her eyes sparkling.

She really is a woman, I thought. She eyed me sharply. "Tenma. Were you just thinking something rude?" she asked.

"No! Not at all!" I stood up straighter as I answered.

Dozle laughed from behind Kanna. "You're so dumb."

"Kanna! Dozle says he'd like you to have his share!" I said, to

punish him. He shook his head vehemently, swearing he'd said nothing of the sort, but I had the feeling she was going to try to eat his share anyway.

Dozle glared at me as I began to make the sweets. I was going to make donuts, pancakes, and flan.

First up was the flan. I added sugar to some milk and warmed it up on the stove. Once the sugar dissolved, I took out the rockbird eggs, which I'd kept cool with magic, and cut them in half vertically. I mixed them in a separate dish since there was so much egg. Then, I strained the mixture and slowly poured it into the empty egg shell halves. In all, there were four portions. Next, I poured two portions at a time into dishes and started cooking them over low heat.

Last, I added some sugar to a pot and put it over the fire. Once the sugar melted, I added water, and that was the caramel sauce. This was the kind of flan where you put the caramel on right before you eat it. I separated the caramel out into four cups and stored it for later.

Next, it was time to make the donuts and pancakes. I filled a large pot with oil and started heating it up. Next I put some flour, a bit of baking soda, rockbird egg, milk, sugar, and melted butter into a bowl and mixed it all up, then separated it out into two equal amounts.

I added a bit more flour at a time into one of the bowls, then turned it out and kneaded it until the batter came together. I cut the dough into strips and then formed them into circles.

The oil was hot now, so I put the donuts in. Once they were browned, I took them out of the oil, rolled them in sugar, and the donuts were finished. I made about fifty donuts in all.

Next, I took the other bowl of batter I'd set aside and added more milk and corn syrup to it, then mixed it up. Once it got to the right consistency, I heated up a frying pan and melted some butter. Then I ladled out the batter onto the frying pan and cooked up the pancakes, browning them on both sides. I made twenty pancakes. Since I didn't have any maple syrup, I had to make do with honey and jam.

It took me an hour and a half to make all that. I put the donuts and pancakes into my magic bag while they were still hot, and I used Ice magic to cool the flan and caramel, then stored those as well.

By the way, I gave Kanna a flan (half an egg shell's worth) with a ton of caramel poured on top, ten donuts, and five pancakes with honey and jam. I'd never seen her happier than she was at that moment. I included Dozle's share in that amount, but I had a feeling he wasn't going to see any of it.

I made a mental note of who wore the pants in that relationship as I took the sweets over to the guild. I went inside and looked for Flute, but I couldn't find her. I asked a staff member I'd never really talked to before, and they said Flute was on break right now. I thought this

was perfect timing, so I had the staff member ask her to come out.

Moments later, Flute emerged. “Did you need me, Tenma?” she asked.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re on your break, but I made you some desserts.”

“Desserts?!” Flute exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

I took two eggshell flan out and poured caramel over them, then thirty donuts, ten pancakes, ten pads of butter, and plenty of honey and jam.

“Feel free to share them with everyone.”

The moment I took the desserts out, the sweet aroma spread through the guild. Everyone inside the guild, especially the ladies, turned to look. Some of the staff members were so thrilled that they were reaching out with both arms.

“Oh my goodness, you made all this for us? Thank you, Tenma!” Flute said. She wasn’t actually looking at me when she said that, though—she was looking at the desserts.

After that, we talked about the payment for the rockbirds, and one of the female staff members took over. I handed over twenty beaks and got 20,000G for them.

By the time I left the guild, nearly every female staff member had thanked me personally.

I had nowhere else to be, so I went straight back to the inn, where a messenger from the knights was waiting for me. “Excuse me, but can you come with me to the headquarters?” I had nothing better to do, so I went with him. I asked him what was going on, and he said Primera wanted to talk to me about the gemstones, the thieves, and the answer her father, Duke Sanga, had given her.

“That was fast.”

Apparently she had borrowed a magical tool from the guild to contact her father. There was a guild in the city where her father lived, and she’d gotten special permission to use the tool since it was an emergency. I asked for more details about this magical tool, but they said they weren’t allowed to discuss it with outsiders. The only thing that they could tell me was that the tool could connect with other magical tools in different locations and you could talk to people through it. I figured it was like some kind of wireless telephone.

Once I got to the headquarters, I was immediately shown to Primera’s room.

“Sorry to call you all the way here, Tenma. But I just got the response from the guild,” she said.

“I was just at the guild and Flute didn’t say a word about it to me.”

“Huh? But I asked her to tell you.” She looked confused.

I wondered if it had completely slipped Flute's mind because she'd been distracted by the cookies. "It's fine. So what happened?"

"Ah, right. I contacted my father about the gemstones and he's asking you to give him the gems for 22,000,000G."

She made it seem like he was the one doing the bargaining, but that was the price we had settled on anyway.

"All right. I'll talk to the triplets." I took the box of gemstones out of my bag. Primera called someone in to check them, then had them put the gems in a vault. She gave me a receipt for them just in case.

"Now, about Guise and the other thieves...we'd like you to turn ownership rights over to us."

"Under what terms?" I asked.

"Well, we're going to sell them, so you can negotiate the price."

I didn't want the thieves, so I really would've just rather sold them for cheap instead of having to bargain for them.

"All right. Can you let me know about two or three days before the slave trader gets here?" I asked. Then I gave her some donuts and pancakes.

"Are you sure I can have these?" she said, but her eyes were already shining. I told her to go ahead and then gave her some honey and butter. I'd given Flute all the jam, so I was out of that.

"Thank you so much! I can't wait to eat it!" she said, already shoving a doughnut into her mouth. I gave her a sidelong glance as I left the room. On the way home, I thought about just how effective desserts were with ladies, so I decided to buy more ingredients to make some more.

Once I got home, Shiromaru, Rocket and I ate the rest of the desserts. The next day I went to tell the triplets about the gemstones, but the first thing they did was pout and say, "You didn't bring us any desserts!" times three. As a result, I ended up spending two whole days making more desserts.

After I gave some to the triplets, Primera contacted me just before lunch and told me that the slave trader would be here in three days. I relayed the info to the triplets but they said, "We don't like negotiations, so you can take care of it!"

Since I knew when the slave trader would be coming, I decided to take on another job in the meantime.

Rank B: Crocodile Shark

Crocodile sharks have been spotted in the river about twenty kilometers from Gunjo City. It's very possible that they will attack people, so they must be slain. Will pay 30,000G per crocodile shark.

Crocodile sharks were just like their name suggested—they were sharks that looked like crocodiles. They had the body of a shark and crocodile limbs, and were about five to six meters in length. Although they were sharks, they could survive for short periods on land. Their limbs weren't well developed; their hind legs were smaller than their front legs, so they moved incredibly slow on land. Once they were on land, their rank dropped to C.

I took my card up to the desk, and the lady there told me it would be difficult for me to take on this job alone since I was a Rank C adventurer. But I snuck her five wrapped donuts and she let me take it after all.

Just then, I felt like someone was watching me. I looked around and saw that Flute had appeared out of nowhere and was staring at me. She smiled and beckoned to the lady at the desk. The lady hesitantly walked over to Flute, who whacked her upside the head with her fist. Not only that, but she confiscated three of the donuts. The lady tearfully handed them over, but Flute was in high spirits. She looked over at me, covered her mouth, and laughed, "*Ho ho ho ho ho!*" then left the room.

Since the lady from the desk was so upset, I went ahead and gave her one more doughnut. Ever since that incident, the female guild staff clamored to be the ones who waited on me. This caused a bit of a commotion, so Flute stepped in with an iron fist and forced them to let her be in charge of waiting on me. A male guild member told me all of this later. At any rate, now that my job request had been accepted without any problems (or had it been?), I quickly got ready and headed to the river in question.

I rode Valley Wind for about an hour and finally reached the river where the crocodiles had been sighted. It was about three hundred meters wide and thirty meters deep. I used Detection to search it, and received several hundred pings across the entire river. I narrowed my search down to include only monsters longer than four meters, and then only picked up five pings. I used Identify, and there they were—the crocodile sharks. I used Detection one more time just in case, this time narrowing in on just crocodile sharks, and still picked up only five of them.

Now that I was certain where they were, I got ready for the battle. Most people used a gill net to catch crocodile sharks, but this time I was trying a new tactic—fishing them up with a pole!

I used alchemy to make a chain about one hundred meters long, and then a giant hook about thirty centimeters long and two centimeters thick. The chain was made of durable elliptical links about five centimeters long with no seams, so it was very strong. I'd made a bunch of them a long time ago, thinking someday they'd

probably come in handy. I intended to use boar as bait. I cut into one of the boar's bloody organs and stuck it on my hook; this would be the perfect bait to lure in the crocodile sharks.

"All done!"

I connected the hook to the chain and wrapped it around a stick I found lying on the ground. I got the bait and cast the line about thirty meters out, near where I'd spotted the group of crocodile sharks. I hadn't even been fishing for ten minutes before I got a bite. I waited for the perfect timing and then pulled the line, but there was such a strong force on the other end I thought I was going to get dragged into the river.

But I remained calm and pushed mana through the line. Just as the magical energy reached the crocodile shark, I used a strong blast of the Lightning spell Stun. I pictured Stun racing through the inside of the crocodile shark's body, so I didn't think it would scare the other ones away. Just in case, I used Detection to make sure. It seemed like the other four had been startled slightly, but they calmed down right away. In fact, they almost seemed excited by the scent of the injured crocodile shark's blood.

Immediately after I finished using Stun, a green shark about five to six meters long floated up to the surface of the water. It seemed to be completely unconscious. I rushed to the shore to reel it in with Shiromaru and Valley Wind's help.

I guessed that the crocodile shark was about three kilograms. It was covered in green, bumpy skin and was twitching. I finished it off by using a non-elemental magic technique I'd devised, called Cross Shock, to destroy its brain. Cross Shock was similar to the non-elemental spell Shock Wave, but it instead dealt damage from several different directions at once with the same power, resulting in a large amount of damage. The good thing about this technique was that although it used weak shock waves that wouldn't affect the outside appearance of the body, it was powerful enough to destroy the target's brain.

There was one major disadvantage to it, though. You couldn't really use it on an enemy in motion. If you tried to hit a moving target with Cross Shock, you probably wouldn't succeed even if you blasted them thousands of times.

However, if you used it on an enemy that wasn't moving, it would have this very result. So it was quite a limited technique, but it left very few marks on the outside of the body. I was thinking about stuffing and mounting this one.

Now that I had managed to fish one up, it didn't take as much time to fish up the others. I decided to kill the other ones normally. The first was just an experiment to see how Cross Shock worked, but

I'd use the other four for meat. I'd heard that crocodiles and sharks were both pretty delicious, so surely a crocodile shark was edible.

Things went smoothly until I'd caught the fourth one. I was cleaning the shark I'd just caught when Shiromaru began to drink from the river. At the moment, I felt a sudden burst of malice from where he was drinking.

"Run, Shiromaru!" I swiftly issued a command, but it all happened so fast that Shiromaru didn't respond fast enough. A crocodile shark burst out from the water and tried to seize Shiromaru with its enormous jaws.

I won't make it in time! I was just about to shoot the crocodile shark with an Air Bullet when I saw Shiromaru raising his right front leg. A blade suddenly shot out from his sharp claws and slashed the crocodile shark, slicing it in half. Shiromaru seemed to be smirking, but in the next moment, the two halves of the crocodile shark crashed onto Shiromaru.

"Awoooo!" Shiromaru let out a scream that almost sounded comical as he fell backwards along with the remains of the crocodile shark.

So many unexpected things had happened one after the other that I just stood there staring for a few seconds, without moving a muscle. Then I quickly snapped back to reality and ran over to Shiromaru. He was covered in blood, but not hurt, and got back up on his feet.

"You seem to be okay. I was worried about you!" In response, he lowered his head and tail. I gave him some pets. Then I used Detection again just in case, but I didn't see any other crocodile sharks around. I tried using different search criteria a few times to be safe, but nothing came up.

Since I'd defeated the crocodile sharks, I decided to have Shiromaru show me his new technique. He focused magical energy into his front legs, and blades shot out from his claws, just like before; it seemed as though he could create up to four blades. I took a closer look at his paws and realized his attack had two variations.

The first was releasing magical energy when his claws were sheathed. If I had to compare it to a human hand, he would release the attack when his paw was in a "karate chop" formation, and it would form one blade.

The second variation was expelling magical energy directly from his claws with his toes spread apart. This was a scratching attack, so the number of blades increased from one to four.

The karate chop version seemed to be easier since he could make a long, sharp blade with it. The other version used a smaller gesture to produce blades.

As Shiromaru was showing me the attack, he had a proud look on

his face. But after I tried it several times and then succeeded in doing it myself, he looked like he was in shock and then sulked. I petted and praised him over and over again to cheer him up, but it didn't work until I cooked up the crocodile shark he'd killed—then he finally perked up.

By the way, for this mission the tail fin served as proof of your kill, so I quickly cut them all off and stored them before Shiromaru could tear them apart—except for the one I planned to stuff and mount.

We played by the river until it began to get dark, and then I rode Valley Wind back home to Gunjo City. I went a bit faster on the way back, so I arrived there within thirty minutes and then headed straight to the guild. I went inside and Flute just happened to be free, so I decided to go ahead and notify her about the mission's completion.

"That was fast. How was it?" she asked. I handed her four crocodile shark tail fins, and her eyes widened with surprise. "You defeated that many in less than half a day!" she exclaimed.

I wanted to give her an even bigger surprise, so I took her out back to the butchering area and produced the body of the crocodile shark that barely had a scratch on it.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!" she screamed loudly—so loudly, in fact, that her voice echoed throughout the guild, and several adventurers came rushing into the butchering area. Unfortunately for them, they came face-to-face with the crocodile shark and immediately readied their weapons. Before they could cut into it, I quickly explained that it was already dead, and they dispersed afterwards.

However, a few of them stayed behind to watch because it was a good chance to see a crocodile shark up close and personal.

"Tenma! Don't surprise me like that!" Flute said, halfway between tears and anger. I apologized and handed her some donuts to make up for it. "Well, I guess I can forgive you this time," she muttered as she took the donuts. *Heh, too easy...*

As I was about to put the crocodile shark into my bag, the butcher went ahead and branded its tail fin for me. The brands were used for proofs of kill that had commodity values, so that other adventurers wouldn't try turning them in for profit themselves. There were some evil adventurers out there who would buy up monsters and save whatever parts of them were proofs of kill, wait until a job got posted for that specific monster, and then try to cash in. It wasn't a problem if the job was just requesting that specific monster part, but it became a huge problem if the job was about actually slaying the monster. If they were caught, they received a range of punishment depending on the severity of their offense, from fines all the way up to the death penalty.

“Here’s your payment for defeating five crocodile sharks: 15,000G. I think it should be fine now, but I’ll send a staff member in a few days to check the river just in case,” Flute said, as she handed me a bag with the money in it. I dumped the cash into my bag. I saw some people glancing at me enviously, but none of them invited me into their parties this time around.

That was either because they knew I was making tons of money from taking jobs solo, or because they were older and didn’t want to depend on a kid for their money...or they knew there was no way I’d agree to join up with them in the first place.

When I first came to the guild, there were some adventurers who tried to force me to work with them, and they were so stubborn about it that I had to teach them a lesson. That was why most people had given up.

“You’re just Rank C, but you’re already the guild’s top earner!” Flute said with a laugh. Now I could feel jealous, malicious glares stabbing me from behind. Once in a while I’d glance over at them, and a few of them were clearly avoiding eye contact.

Looks like I’ve worn my welcome out here too, I thought to myself.

Part Eight

Three days later, I visited the knights' headquarters. Today, a messenger from Duke Sanga would be coming. I went to the same room as when I'd signed my contract with Primera.

"Have some tea, Tenma. And here's some snacks too."

"Thank you."

Primera set some tea and refreshments in front of me. She sat down across from me, seeming somewhat anxious. If someone who didn't know either of us were watching, they would have a hard time telling which of us was the knight—that's how fidgety she was.

"Primera, are you hiding something from me?" I asked. Immediately, she froze.

"N-No! I'm not hiding anything at all!"

Something was definitely fishy. I stared at her and she quickly looked away. There was sweat beading on her forehead. So I just kept staring at her. That continued for a few minutes until there was a knock at the door.

"C-Come in."

"Excuse me, Captain. The messenger from Duke Sanga has arrived," a young girl said, entering the room.

"A-All right. I'll show them in." Primera quickly left the room, perhaps to escape my gaze. For some reason, I had a feeling that something very troublesome was about to happen.

There was another knock about five minutes later and Primera came back in with a man who looked to be in his thirties, with a kind smile on his face. I used Identify on him and then stood up to introduce myself.

"I'm Tenma, an adventurer. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, *Duke Sanga*," I said, making sure not to be rude as I bowed my head.

"H-How did you...?! " Primera exclaimed with surprise.

Name: Alsace von Sanga

Age: 48

Class: Human

Title: Duke of Sanga

The duke looked surprised for a moment as well, but then smiled at me. "Primera, don't make such a fuss. You're Tenma, are you? It's nice to meet you. I'm Primera's father, Alsace von Sanga. I'm also a duke." He politely introduced himself after giving his daughter a light

scolding.

He certainly wasn't what I'd imagined the duke would look like, but he didn't seem to be looking down on me. He did appear a bit cautious about me, though. However, the most surprising thing was that he was forty-eight years old. When he sat next to Primera, he looked young enough to be mistaken for her boyfriend.

"You look very young to be a duke," I said, after a pause.

He gave a wry chuckle. "I may not look it, but I'm nearly fifty years old. My friends tease me sometimes and say maybe I'm actually an elf!" I could tell he was used to getting a lot of grief about his youthful appearance. His friends were probably just jealous.

"Now, shall we get to the point? Have a seat," he said, and I did so. He sat next to Primera, across from me. "First of all, thank you for getting those jewels back. I can't go into that much detail about them, but they belong to a certain noblewoman and were stolen by those thieves. Apparently they were a gift from her husband, and she was quite dejected when they were taken from her. I'm only sorry I couldn't pay you more." He told me that if she gave him any more money for the jewels, he would give it to me directly. Apparently he really *had* been asking me for the jewels, and not demanding them.

Although he was a duke, there was something about him that reminded me of Primera... *Ah, I know*. They were both complete airheads! Like father, like daughter.



“No, you don’t have to pay extra. This was more than enough,” I said, turning down his offer. We’d already decided on the amount when we’d drawn up the contract, so there was no reason to accept more.

“Are you sure?” the duke asked. He took twenty-two platinum coins from his bag, then handed them to me. I didn’t bother checking them for authenticity before putting them in my own bag. If I spent too much time looking over them, it might make him uncomfortable, and I didn’t want that. Most of all, though, there was no way the duke would give me counterfeit money.

“So, what are the conditions for transferring you the ownership rights of Guise?” I asked. At these words, the duke’s expression turned reluctant.

“Well, about that... His father is a baronet and he’s raising quite an objection,” he said, with difficulty.

“So he’s saying his son—Guise—is innocent and that I’m the one at fault?”

The duke let out a sigh. “Yes. He’s saying there’s no way his son could’ve lost to a child unless you had used some kind of cowardly means.”

“My methods have nothing to do with the crimes he committed.”

“That’s true, but he says anyone who used cowardly means to beat his son can’t be trusted in the first place.”

“Guise was way more cowardly than me. He and his cronies were the ones who ganged up on me—a child—and tried to steal my loot,” I said with a smile.

The duke gave me a surprised look. “You’re not afraid of nobles?”

I couldn’t exactly tell him I was friends with the top noble of this country, the king. “I mean no disrespect to nobles, but is a baronet really more frightening than a duke?” I said—not exactly accusing him of acting on borrowed authority, but in a somewhat joking tone of voice. I had a feeling the duke was on my side, and even if something happened, I knew I could get out of just about anything. Besides, if I really set my mind to escaping, not even the duke could catch me.

“Don’t let anyone else hear you say that,” he laughed. He must’ve understood my joke, or maybe he just wanted to believe it was one.

“I’m sorry... That was a little bold of me. But I have a feeling that means Guise is refusing to cooperate with the investigation, then?”

“Yes, that’s right. His father is a noble, even if it is in name only. We can’t subject his son to the inquisitor without his permission. Also, apart from matters concerning his son, the baronet is an exemplary man.”

“Can’t you make him submit to the inquisitor since he’s a

criminal?"

However, the duke shook his head. "If we did that, it could lead to an uprising. His faction has a considerable amount of power, so if we don't go about this carefully, it could be very damaging." He seemed beside himself as to what to do.

"Why not have a duel, then?" I said casually.

"Oh, good idea!" he replied. "Yes, there should be no complaints if you have a duel, especially since that's a very noble way of settling things. If I give him a little nudge, I'm sure he'll agree." The duke seemed awfully cheery, and as for me, I didn't mind an evil scheme.

"Should I slap him in the face with my glove?" I asked, and the duke said that was a good idea. The two of us excitedly began to go over the details. Meanwhile, Primera sat there like she was the only one out of the loop.

"Are you sure about this, though? He has several very skilled adventurers around him," he asked me, showing concern for the first time.

"As long as a bunch of first-class adventurers don't show up, I can manage. I've got a trump card, anyway."

"That's right—I did hear you have a Rank A monster follower. And if you defeated Banza and his group of bandits, you should be fine," he agreed.

I left the duke responsible for convincing the baronet to agree, and then we started negotiating Guise's ownership rights.

"How about 200,000G for Guise and then twenty percent of the baronet's fortune? He might be just an honorary noble, but he's got more saved up than an actual baronet," he said.

"That's fine. But I'd like my payment in all cash." The reason I asked for this was because if my compensation ended up being in the form of rights, the duke would have to get involved. That was too much of a pain, so I wanted to make it clear that I would only accept cash from the very start.

"You're not interested? That's a shame."

I'd also had a feeling that was what he'd had up his sleeve. Primera just looked confused.

"No, I'm not interested in that sort of *engagement*," I said with a smile.

The duke was smiling too. He probably thought I'd be lucky if I had agreed. "Well, let's proceed with the contract." He quickly started jotting things down on a piece of paper. Given that he was a duke, he must have been quite used to making up contracts. "Read the contract carefully and then sign here."

He handed me three pieces of paper. I looked over all of them, and then signed.

“All right. We’ll each keep one copy, and then file the other with the guild. That will make you feel more at ease, won’t it, Tenma?”
We shook on it, and the contract was complete.

The Duke’s Manor

“How did the meeting with that villainous brat go, Your Grace?”

It was the day after Alsace and Tenma had signed the contract. There was a man waiting there for the duke when he returned. His name was Regir Vend, and he was an honorary baronet and Guise’s father.

In general, honorary nobles were not permitted to be called by their middle names. Some even shared family names with commoners. That was why many nobles thought that honorary nobles were not real nobles at all.

The fact that Regir was able to go by his middle name until death was because he was so worthy a man. However, neither of his two sons had inherited his talents. His oldest son was mediocre at best, and his next son was a common thief. One would have thought he would prefer his mediocre oldest son, who was the spitting image of his wife, but he was more fond of his younger son, who resembled himself.

“Your Grace...how is Guise...? How is my son?” Lately, Regir wasn’t as sharp as he had been when he was younger. He was still a man of many talents, or at least Alsace thought—except when it came to his son.

Alsace put on a disappointed face, careful not to reveal the details of his plan with Tenma. “Unfortunately, the negotiations went south. The other party will not back down from saying that your son was the one at fault.”

Regir was enraged. “What?! But that simply can’t be! Why did you let that little brat get away with this?!” Judging by his expression, he thought the duke quite idiotic.

“Don’t be like that. He’s got the support of the guild. You know it would be reckless to make an enemy of the guild, even for a duke. If we’re not careful, this will make me look rather weak to others. Anyway, did you really think I’d come here without a plan?”

“So then you’ve got a plan!”

Got him! Alsace thought to himself. “Yes, that’s right. There shall be a duel! In ten days, his champion will fight our champion, and whoever wins will be declared just in this dispute! Of course, the brat himself will fight. I already received agreement from him. Here’s proof!” He showed Regir the signed contract from Tenma. The contract stipulated the rules of the duel, and stated the rights of the

victor.

Regir scanned the contract and then smirked. "Of course, I'll be the one to decide our champion. You don't mind, do you?"

That was exactly what Alsace and Tenma had been hoping he'd say.

"Go right ahead. I won't interfere with what happens to your son either. You'll decide what to do with him when the time comes."

Alsace was making it clear he would not get involved regardless of what happened, but of course the baronet was oblivious to the implications of this.

"Well then, I'll be returning home to get everything ready," Regir said, excusing himself.

As Alsace watched him go, he murmured, "He's a wonderful man, but there's no helping him now. It's not like he's irreplaceable or anything..."

CONTRACT

This is a binding agreement which states that, on XX day of XX month, Tenma (hereafter referred to as Party A) and Regir Vend (hereafter referred to as Party B) shall settle their dispute by means of a duel.

No matter the outcome, both parties hereby agree that the loser shall raise no further objection against the victor of the aforementioned duel.

Each party shall nominate a representative to fight on their behalf. A victor shall be named according to the following requirements, whichever comes first:

- 1) Upon one party losing consciousness.**
- 2) Upon one party admitting defeat.**
- 3) Upon one party being no longer able to fight.**

There are no restrictions regarding the types of weapon or magic that may be used. However, both parties agree to the following conditions: neither party may continue to attack the other once the criteria for victory has been met, and there is to be no fighting outside the designated dueling area. Any party who breaks these rules shall immediately

be declared the loser.

Furthermore, if either party is killed as a result of the duel, the victor shall not be held liable for crimes as long as the killing blow was an attack within the rules of the duel.

We, the undersigned, agree with the contents of this contract and swear to abide by the terms.

Party A Tenma

Party B Regir Vend

After Regir had signed the contract under his name, he looked again at a certain word and then snickered to himself.

“‘Representative,’ eh?”

He was so confident in his victory that he'd already poured himself a celebratory drink; however, at that time he had no idea that this would mark the downfall of his son—and himself.

Part Nine

After I signed the contract with the duke, word of the duel had spread like wildfire—thanks, in fact, to the duke.

“The more people know about it, the less likely they are to try to get out of it or make excuses,” he said to me. He *was* a duke, after all, so even if he seemed like an airhead, he was pretty cunning.

Anyway, thanks to him, there was a festive mood in the city. After all, a newbie adventurer had just picked a fight with a noble. Not only that, but both the guild and a duke had given their formal permission for a duel to occur. From an ordinary citizen’s point of view, this was like the ultimate form of entertainment. People all over town were betting on the outcome.

The guild was even taking bets, and were now rolling in cash because everyone trusted them with their money. According to the guild, the odds were currently 3.5 for me and 1.2 for the baronet. Everyone I knew was betting on me, but most average citizens thought there was no way a kid could beat a noble, so they were betting on him. In fact, Dozle and the triplets were already thanking me for the easy money I was about to make them.

Flute was one of the bookies at the guild, and since she knew for certain I was going to win, she was mad she wasn’t able to bet on me herself. However, even though I was one of the challengers, *I* could bet on myself...so I did.

“Hello, Flute. I can place a bet too, right?”

“Oh, Tenma! Yes, the guild rules state you may place bets, as long as they’re not on your opponent.”

I heard other townspeople around us whispering, “There’s the idiot,” and, “Don’t say that. It’s because he’s an idiot that we’re gonna be rich!” Clearly, they thought I was going to lose.

Meanwhile, the adventurers who knew me were desperately trying to stifle laughter.

“How much would you like to bet?” Flute took out a betting sheet.

“1,000,000G.” As I took out a platinum coin, I heard a buzz in the crowd, along with two different kinds of shrieks. The first were cheers from the people betting on the baronet. The second were curses from the adventurers who’d bet on me.

The people betting on the baronet laughed. This time, I heard things like, “He’s a real idiot!” and, “Look at what a nice guy he is, helping us fatten our wallets!”

Meanwhile, the adventurers who bet on me were cursing. “Read the room, you dumbass!”

“Don’t lower the odds, you bastard!”

“All right, I’ve recorded your bet. Be careful not to lose this receipt.” Flute was the only one who was behaving normally. I took the betting slip and walked out of the guild, being cursed the entire way. Right before I exited, I turned around and flipped off the adventurers to provoke them even more, and someone threw a chair at me. Luckily, by that time I’d already walked out the door so it didn’t hit me. I’d bet whoever had thrown it was getting strangled by Flute right about now, though.

After that, the townspeople who heard the rumors from the guild changed their bets over to me, but since people thought they would make more money off of the baronet, the final odds were still 3.5 on me and 1.1 on the baronet.

The duel was tomorrow at noon, and the baronet would be arriving in town this evening. I decided to go back to the inn so I could get my weapons ready. But I felt someone watching me on the way there—and it wasn’t just one or two someones.

At first, I thought they were watching me because of the duel. But it didn’t seem to be because of that. I changed directions and went to see Primera at the knights’ headquarters instead.

“What brings you here, Tenma?” Primera quickly came down to see me after I asked for her at the front desk. The lady working there remembered me, so she was probably just being kind. I told Primera what was going on and she immediately sent some of her knights around back to look around. A while later, a knight in plainclothes came back to tell her he’d spotted four adventurers he’d never seen before hanging around the back alley.

“We’re not sure if they’re just watching Tenma, or if they intend to do him harm. But they’ve almost certainly been sent by the baronet.”

I agreed. Actually, I couldn’t think of what else it *could* have been. I thought for a minute. “Primera. May I stay at the knights’ headquarters tonight? I’ll pay for lodging, of course.”

Primera said she wasn’t authorized to make that kind of decision. “I’ll go ask the other captains.” She was gone for about ten minutes, but when she came back she said, “The other captains have given permission. However, as payment you’ll have to straighten up the weapons shed.” She looked apologetic. I wasn’t sure why she looked so sorry until she showed me to the place.

“What in the world...? Well, this is certainly something.” There were mountains of old weapons and armor piled haphazardly on top of each other.

“I’m so sorry! One of the captains heard that you can control golems, so he said we wouldn’t have to worry about you getting hurt

cleaning up the shed.” I told her she was right; it wouldn’t be that big of a deal for me. “Thank you so much! There are a lot of old and broken weapons in here, and before we knew it, it just got out of control...”

I asked her which unit was supposed to be in charge of maintaining the weapons shed, and, avoiding eye contact, she said in a tiny, halting voice, “The...fourth unit...”

“Yours?!” Now I understood why the job had been foisted off on me. They’d probably asked her to do it and now I was cleaning up her mess.

“I’m so sorry! But the men in my unit really aren’t good at this sort of thing...” She bowed her head.

I sighed. “Well, I’m the one who asked to stay here, so it’s fine. Could you leave a few guards with me just in case, though?” I wanted them around for security.

“No problem! I’ll find a few guys who don’t have anything to do and get them to help.” Apparently she’d misunderstood and thought I wanted the guards to help me clean.

A few minutes later, five knights showed up. “All right, Tenma! Let’s get started!” And for some reason, Primera was one of them, even though she was the captain.

“What about your own work?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m done for the day!” she answered cheerfully.

I wasn’t sure she was telling the truth, but at any rate, I went outside and summoned fifty small golems, then got them started on the work. That was the most small golems I could produce at the moment. But these guys could easily mop the floor with Primera’s unit.

First, I had the knights carry all the equipment out of the shed. Then I told them to separate them into piles of weapons and armor. Including the broken weapons, there were about three hundred swords, one hundred and fifty spears, one hundred bows, four hundred arrows, and one hundred miscellaneous other weapons. As for the armor, there were eighty shields, forty breastplates, ten suits of full armor, and thirty miscellaneous pieces of armor.

Once they had all that out of the shed, I had them carry the shelves out too. It took about an hour for them to empty the weapons shed. I had the golems further separate the piles and remove the broken or rusted pieces. Meanwhile, I cleaned the inside of the weapons shed.

First, I filled the room with steam to lift up the dirt particles. Then I used Water magic to rinse everything off like I had at Banza’s place. I watched as the spray gradually rinsed away the dirt. I wished I had some kind of soap, but it was better than nothing.

I used Wind magic to sweep all the dirty water outside. Then I used Earth magic to repair any cracked or broken structures inside the shed. Now I just had to use Wind magic again to dry out the interior. All of that took me about an hour to do.

Now that I was finished, I went outside and saw that the golems and knights were still working on sorting through the piles.

“I’m done.”

“What? Already?” Primera looked shocked. That didn’t surprise me, since she’d never had the idea to clean the dump in the first place and she was the one who’d let it get to that point. But now it was so clean you could see the walls and the floor, plus I’d done repairs on it. “Tenma. Will you join the knights?”

“No.”

At my immediate reply, her shoulders slumped. I gave her a sidelong glance and then went to join in the sorting efforts. “What do you want me to do with the things that can’t be repaired?”

“Oh, right! The blacksmith will take those.” That was what Primera said, but she was putting several items that could be repaired into the junk pile. I pointed that out to her. “What?! These can be fixed?!” she exclaimed with surprise, holding up a spear that had a broken tip which could easily be replaced.

I took the spear from her and looked around for the same type of spearhead, then switched it out. She and the rest of the other knights looked absolutely flabbergasted.

“Hey, Primera?”

“Yes? What is it, Tenma?”

I pointed to the rest of the knights. “Are those guys from noble families too?”

“Yes. Our unit has many knights from noble families, for some reason.”

I was getting a feeling that the fourth unit was just deadweight, but Primera herself, although somewhat of an airhead, didn’t seem to be entirely useless, and had some abilities about her. And I’d seen some other knights who seemed like they could hold their own too. Now it finally made sense—these weren’t just the lackeys of the knights’ brigade. They were just a bunch of knights who’d had a sheltered upbringing.

“How about this sword?” one of the knights asked, holding up a sword that was missing its tip and was a little bent.

“The blacksmith could definitely fix that one.”

“How about this one?”

“This type of spear doesn’t have interchangeable heads, so that one can go to the junk pile.”

And so they began to consult with me before sorting the

equipment. I went ahead and taught the knights how to judge bows and spears for quality and repair, and then I started on the swords. It took about two hours to sort through the swords, but even then the knights still weren't finished.

I went to go help them, but then Primera said, "How about we take a break, Tenma?" So, we all decided to take a break together.

While we did so, I felt several people watching me. I turned around and saw four knights standing there. They looked surprised and then approached me. Primera heard footsteps, and quickly leapt to her feet and bowed. The other knights who were resting with us followed suit.

"Ah, sorry to bother you on your break," one of the knights said. He held up a hand and the other knights stood at ease.

I used Identify on him.

Name: Alan van Daughtress

Age: 45

Class: Human

Title: Baron and Commander of the Gunjo City Knights

There were three knights behind the knight commander, and they were the highest-ranking knights in the city.

Name: Santos Knight

Age: 35

Class: Human

Title: Captain of the Gunjo City Knights first brigade, honorary baron

Name: Simon Cairo

Age: 28

Class: Human

Title: Captain of the Gunjo City Knights second brigade, honorary baron

Name: Aida Reiss

Age: 27

Class: Human

Title: Captain of the Gunjo City Knights third brigade, honorary baron

"What are you all doing here?" Primera asked nervously.

"No particular reason. You seemed to be having trouble, so we came to see what you were up to. You can remain at ease," Alan said.

"Actually, the commander couldn't sit still when he heard you

were with a man,” Santos quipped.

“You’ll be punished for that later. Keep your mouth shut!” Simon cautioned.

“Everyone wanted to come see the man who’s been the talk of the town lately,” Aida confessed.

The whole time, they were all staring directly at me.

“So you’re the one everyone’s been talking about... You’re awfully young.” Alan, the man speaking, was muscular with a shaved head and a goatee.

“He really is. Doesn’t seem like someone who could’ve taken care of Banza and his group single-handedly.” As for Santos, he was a large man who must’ve been over two meters tall.

“You shouldn’t judge people by their appearances! He sensed us coming right away.” Simon, for his part, was of average height and average build, and had a kind face.

“I’ve heard about his accomplishments from a friend at the guild. If what they said is right, we’d have no chance against him unless we all took him on together.” Aida was a woman, taller than Simon. She had short hair and light brown skin.

“Is that true?!” The others looked surprised to hear that. All Alan said was, “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s true. You all know I don’t make jokes like that.”

“That’s true, but still... Don’t you think that’s an exaggeration?” Simon asked, but Aida shook her head.

“Right after he came to this town, he defeated two ogres at the age of thirteen! Don’t you remember? All the knights panicked when we heard there were two ogres on the loose.”

“I remember the ogre commotion, and although it’s amazing that he defeated two of them, I think we’re still stronger,” Santos said.

“That’s not all. After that, he must have defeated a group of monsters Rank B and higher, because someone witnessed him selling their parts to the guild. Also...” She glanced at me. “A long time ago, I tried focusing all my hostility in his direction, just to see what would happen.”

That was a shocking confession. The rest of the knights looked stunned, and I was also very surprised. But to be honest, I didn’t know when this had gone down, because I’d experienced that sort of thing regularly since I’d arrived in this city.

“So what happened?” Santos asked.

Aida laughed lightly. “I thought he was going to kill me! Once I realized he’d noticed me, I ran all the way back to my room in the knights’ headquarters, locked the door, and hid under my desk.”

I apologized, but since I didn’t really remember the incident, she said not to worry about it.

“Well, if Aida insists, maybe we really couldn’t beat him unless we all banded together,” Alan crossed his arms thoughtfully. Then he said, “Tenma, would you join the knights?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.” My reply was swift.

“I asked him the same thing, Commander, and his answer hasn’t changed,” Primera said.

“I see...” Alan looked disappointed. Meanwhile, Primera seemed relieved that I’d turned down someone else and that it hadn’t been personal.

“Commander, we should get back. If we stay here much longer, we’ll be getting in the way,” Simon said.

Alan nodded and was about to leave, when I ran up to him and asked in a quiet voice, “Alan, did you put the fourth brigade in charge of the weapons room to teach them about weapons?”

“That’s right. They’re all the children of nobles, and although they’re talented, they have no common sense and lack basic knowledge. That’s why I give them as many tasks like this as possible so they can learn those things. Keep it a secret, okay?” After saying this, he finally left.

“All right, let’s keep going.” Upon my order, the knights resumed their work. Twenty more knights had come to help, so now we could sort through things faster. I had to count the new weapons and armor, though.

About three hours after we began, we had finally sorted through everything. It was almost time for dinner. Primera led me to the room I would be staying in tonight. I had dinner in the mess hall, but to be perfectly honest, it was very inferior to the food at the Full Belly Inn.

The first thing I did once I got back to my room was feed Shiromaru and Rocket their dinner. I took some jerky and soft-boiled rice out of my bag and put it onto a plate, then put it into the dimension bag. Shiromaru shoved his face into the plate as if he’d been eagerly awaiting that moment.

After that, I started preparing the weapons I’d be using for the duel. Once I was done, I climbed right into bed. I didn’t think I’d lose, but I decided to go to sleep and rest up as much as possible for the next day.

At a Certain Manor

A man knelt before his boss in a dark room. There were several other figures surrounding him. “I apologize for not being able to harm him.”

The man who had spoken was dressed like an adventurer, but since he could walk so silently, the people around him thought he

must be a spy or an assassin instead.

“That little brat ran off into the knights’ headquarters.”

A buzz went around the room. The man’s boss—Regir—bellowed, “That brat has the backing of the knights?!”

The man remained impassive. “I believe the chances of that are low. I think it’s because he sensed he was being followed. I have reason to believe this because after he entered the building, a knight in plainclothes appeared and began investigating the area. Even though they’re the knights, they probably feel obligated to repay him for defeating the bandit Banza. I think they most likely helped him in order to repay him, but now they’ll be even,” the man explained.

“I see. Very well, then. I want you to keep working tomorrow. Good work today.”

“Yes, sir!”

The man left the room and Regir had the others leave as well. He stared at the contract on his desk. “You snot-nosed little brat. I’ll show you just who you’re up against!” he said with an evil laugh.

Part Ten

It was the day of the duel, and it was a full house. There must have been more than twenty thousand people in the audience. The sponsors who had secured the venue were visibly relieved.

Actually, this arena had been constructed outside the city on short notice just for this event. The town's magicians had worked with people hired by the guild to dig up an area of grasslands near the city before hardening the ground. So really, it was just a glorified soccer field. There was no underground passageway or dressing rooms, but there were tents for the competitors to get ready in, away from the audience.

Gunjo City had a fighting arena, but that would only hold five thousand people and there were fifty thousand residents. They held a meeting and decided they wanted as many citizens to see the duel as possible, so they chose to build an arena outside of town.

Since the duke was pulling the strings behind the scenes, he'd given them the suggestion the day after he came to the city. He had the guild cooperate, so the arena was completed at an usually fast pace of three days.

The duel was going to happen just past noon. I made some final checks of my weapons and equipment after I woke up, then had breakfast, but there were still three hours until the duel. I decided to use the knights' practice area to do some light training with Shiromaru before I had to fight.

I got permission from Alan to use the area. Once we were facing each other, Shiromaru and I stood about fifty meters apart. Primera was acting as the judge. The rules were no magic, which meant no Boost magic either, and no weapons—basically, we could only face each other in plain hand-to-hand combat. At first I asked Alan to be the judge, but he said no and told me to have Primera do it instead. I had a feeling he wanted to watch Shiromaru and I fight himself. He was standing in the closest spot to us, after all. Of course, Primera had no idea that was how she'd ended up being the judge.

She gave the signal and then the battle started. Shiromaru and I lunged towards each other. He opened his mouth wide as he dashed towards me, but I slid beneath his jaw and grabbed his left front leg with my right hand, while my other hand seized the fur by his throat to knock him down.

It sort of strangely resembled a judo move. But the second I grabbed onto his fur, Shiromaru kicked off the ground with his back legs and jumped forward, escaping my grasp. I'd had a feeling he was

going to do that, so I immediately pursued him once he landed.

Shiromaru hadn't righted himself yet. When he realized he wouldn't be able to dodge me, he fell into a defensive stance. I launched my right fist towards him. He dug into the ground with all four legs, but the moment my fist hit his right shoulder, he was flung into the air from the impact. The knights who were watching cheered when they saw Shiromaru go flying, but he made a clean landing about five meters away as if nothing had happened. I had a feeling he'd let himself get hit like that on purpose.

The moment he landed, he sprang towards me and began swiping his left and right paws one after the other. While I was concerned with evading his front paws, Shiromaru snuck into my personal space and headbutted me right in the chest. Now it was my turn to go flying ten meters through the air. But just like Shiromaru, I let myself keep going and, not to be outdone by him, made a clean landing too.

Primera and the knights cheered loudly when I landed, but the noise died down immediately. That was because the moment I landed, I started to approach Shiromaru. He was hunched over, holding his head.

"Huh?! Ah, the match is over!" Primera called the match to a halt, sounding confused.

"Are you okay, Shiromaru?" I asked.

"Awooo! Awooo!" he whined weakly in response.

Primera walked over to us. "Tenma, what just happened?"

I use Recovery magic on Shiromaru. "I punched Shiromaru's head when he headbutted me." I pointed out the swelling on my right fist. Then I cast Recovery magic on Shiromaru, and he was right as rain. I'd punched him as hard as I could, but he looked fine. I went ahead and healed my hand as well. Shiromaru had quite a hard skull, and I'd punched it with all my might. I was tough, but not *that* tough. I'd only fought Shiromaru for a few minutes, and yet I was more exhausted than when I'd taken on Banza and all his men.

Primera watched in astonishment as I went ahead and began training exercises with Shiromaru. Afterwards, I wiped off my sweat and had a light meal, then took a short nap to kill the rest of the time before the duel. I woke up about an hour later, stretched, washed my face, and decided to leave the knights' headquarters. I walked at a leisurely pace, since the arena was less than thirty minutes away.

Several people called out to me on the way there. Most of what they said regarded the betting, but what surprised me the most was that even those who had bet on the baronet offered me words of encouragement. Some of them were just making fun of me, though. They shut right up when I glared at them, prompting laughter from others around us.

Once I arrived at the arena, a guild member at the check-in area showed me to a tent where I could prepare. The tent was about ten meters away from the spectator seats, and there were ten knights guarding the space to keep nonparticipants away.

There were friends and supporters surrounding my tent. They cheered me on the whole time until I entered it. I felt a little shy as I walked inside. For some reason, the triplets and Flute were waiting for me inside.

“Ooh, there you are!”

“What took you so long, Tenma?!”

“We’ve been waiting here for an hour!”

The triplets complained.

“Tenma, we’ll be here to support you today,” Flute told me. They had things like towels, drinks, and medicine.

“I can see why the triplets would be here...but you work for the guild, Flute. What are you doing here?” Technically, members of the guild were supposed to be neutral, so I didn’t understand.

“Yes, normally, I wouldn’t be allowed in here, but as the baronet made a false accusation against us, I was given permission.”

“A ‘false accusation’?” I gave her a confused look.

“He said that since you and I are close, there would be no way to tell if I was being impartial as long as I remained a guild member. So, I’ve taken a temporary leave of absence from the guild to fully support you. I’m here right now just as an ordinary citizen.” She said it cheerfully, but I sensed a very dark anger behind the smile on her face. She must have been really furious about it. The triplets seemed pretty terrified of her too.

“O-Oh, really? Well, thanks for being here today. You three as well!”

“Sure!” the triplets chorused.

“Of course!” Flute answered.

A few moments later, I heard cheers from the other tent. The baronet must’ve arrived. I had no desire to go check for myself, though, so I just chatted with the four girls and stretched until it was time to begin.

As it got closer to noon, I began to hear the buzz of the crowd. Just as I thought it was probably about time to start, a guild member popped in and said, “It’s time. Please get ready and come out to the center of the arena.”

I took my sword out of my bag and left the tent. The crowd went wild the moment I emerged. We walked to the center of the arena, and I saw a man I hadn’t seen for a very long time.

“Here’s your contract.”

“Thank you, Guildmaster.”

It was Max Bellcap, a human who served as the guildmaster of the Gunjo City guild association.

Name: Max Bellcap

Age: 41

Class: Human

Title: Guildmaster, Former Rank A Adventurer

The general impression of the guildmaster was that he was a rather lazy person even on the job, but he was sharp-witted when it really counted.

“Of course.”

Shortly after that, the baronet came over and the guildmaster handed him a contract as well. There were around thirty large men following him, who were apparently serving as his guards. I used Identify on them and saw there were thirteen Rank Cs, sixteen Rank Bs, and one Rank A.

“I’ve finished confirming the contracts. I’ll now ask both parties to leave their champions here and then back up against the wall.”

The triplets and Flute wished me good luck and left, but for some reason the baronet and his thirty guards remained.

“Baronet Regir? You will need to dismiss your guards, please,” the guildmaster urged.

Regir smiled. “Whatever do you mean, Guildmaster? This is my representative, the Vend Guard. The contract didn’t say my representative had to be *one person*.” I’d personally never heard such a ridiculous argument in my life.

“But this is a duel. I realize you are a noble, but...”

“Are you mocking me?! I’m following the rules of the contract! Now call the duel to a start!” He wasn’t budging. The guildmaster didn’t seem to know what to do.

“In that case, we’re joining too!”

“Yeah, if we help Tenma it’ll be an easy victory!”

“That’s right! There’s no way we’d lose to someone who’d throw such a childish tantrum!”

The triplets were mad, and they enthusiastically volunteered to fight.

“I’ll help too, even though I’m not that strong!” Even Flute was throwing her hat into the ring.

“Give me a break, you guys...” The guildmaster was beside himself.

“I doubt four little girls will give you much of an edge against us!” Regir said, leering at them. The crowd started booing him. I could feel the hostile glares from the triplets’ fan club all the way from the

spectators' seats.

"Guys, this really isn't necessary," I said with a sigh. "I'll be fine. Just go back by the wall." I tried to reassure them, but the four of them weren't listening. This time, I boosted my voice with the use of some mana and spoke more harshly. "Do you think I'd lose to him in the first place?" The four of them jumped at this, and then reluctantly walked over to the wall. "All right, Guildmaster. I gotta get rid of some pests, so can you hurry up and call this duel to a start? I wanna get this over with," I said casually.

Regir and his men all turned a deep shade of red—every man except for one of them. Apparently he'd gathered a bunch of hotheads in his crew. I may have forgotten to mention that the guildmaster was holding a magic item that amplified our voices so that the whole arena could hear us, and once they heard my insults my supporters began to laugh.

"Very well. I now call to order the duel between the adventurer Tenma and the honorary baronet Regir! And...you may begin!" The guildmaster brought his hand down halfheartedly, as if by this point he thought the whole thing was just a giant pain.

"Die, you snot-nosed little bra—AAAAHHHH!" One of the men charged at me, but I quickly knocked him back, sending him rolling about ten meters across the ground until he came to a stop.

"What was that?!" Regir yelled.

I ignored him and focused magical energy into my right hand, punching one man after another as they charged at me.

"Put up the magical barrier!" the Rank A adventurer screamed.

"Oh, c'mon. You're gonna put up a barrier just because I knocked out four of your men? You must be a Rank A poser." This was a common insult adventurers used among themselves when speaking of someone who didn't seem worthy of their rank. Most of the time these posers just tagged along in parties with people stronger than they were to mooch experience points, and passed exams because of personal connections. Since adventurers were usually the proctors of these exams, they were easy to rig.

"You cocky little brat! Hey! I want all the magic users to focus your spells on him!"

At this, twenty of the men began to cast spells, all targeted at me.

These guys are idiots. They actually have magicians who can use battle magic, but the dumbasses are using Fire and Water magic at the same time! In this world, there were several types of magic that were incompatible for simultaneous use. The best example of this was Fire and Water, and also Fire and Wood. However, since only elves could use Wood magic (not to mention many elves were weak against Fire magic), the most general example was Fire and Water. Other

elemental spells had weaker levels of incompatibility. Even with Fire and Water, the effects would depend on the user's power. Sometimes there could be surprising results, so you couldn't say for certain that they *weren't* supposed to be used together...but that didn't apply to the fools who were in front of me right now.

While I was thinking about all this, their spells landed near me. Even though I thought it was a bit of a waste, I decided that this was the moment. "Come out, Guardian Giganto!"

Since they'd fired off so many spells at once, it had kicked up so much smoke and dust that no one could see.

"What an idiot! He's so scared he's just standing there! Good work, men!" Confident that he'd won, Regir started congratulating his guards. "Hey, referee! Hurry up and declare my victory!" he started whining to the guildmaster.

This was the perfect time to reveal my trump card. It made a tremendous noise and blew away the smoke with very little effort.

"I'm sorry—*whose* victory?"

I emerged from the smoke without a scratch on me, much to the surprise of my opponents and the crowd. But the thing that made them buzz even more were the two huge arms that had appeared to protect me. I'd named this Guardian Giganto, but its body consisted of just the two arms, each over three meters long. One sprouted from each of my shoulders, and had protected me from the magical attacks.

I'd created them using the metal ridges and magical core of the dragon zombie. It was constructed very similarly to a golem, but rigged so that it would only move via my magical energy. If I focused my intent on the arms, I could move them at will, but since that meant I suddenly had four arms to control at once, it had been difficult to learn how to maneuver them at first. I'd practiced a lot and gotten used to it by now, though. I wouldn't say I could use them just as well as my actual arms, but I could use them well enough at the same time when attacking and defending. If I focused *really* hard on Giganto, I could move them more or less just like my own arms.

Giganto had high defense and magical resistance. And since they were so large, they had high attack power as well. I could also switch out the hand parts and the exterior armor. I'd gotten the idea from a Sealed Arm from a certain card game. Picture a Stand from a certain bizarre adventurer, and that's pretty much what it looked like.

"I-It's a monster!" one of the Rank B guards screamed.

"It's nothing more than a paper tiger! Everyone attack!" Regir tried to set his men on me, but none of them budged. "I'll pay ten times the reward I promised for anyone who can defeat that brat!"

"Ten times...? Are you serious?" I heard them mutter, and then the surviving guards all charged me at once.



"I'm gonna kill you!"

"No, *I'm* gonna kill him!"

"Prepare to die, brat!"

I swung my right arm with a *whoosh*, landing a punch directly on the men so hard that it created a chain reaction, sending them flying into the guys behind them. Most of the guards who were left after that started to run away, but I cast magic at them, picking them off one by one.

When I was finished, the only ones remaining were Regir and five men, including the one Rank A adventurer. The rest were Rank B.

"Time to end this." I swung my own arms as I approached the men, and the Giganto arms moved in the same fashion, creating the sound of a whirling vortex of wind.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Hurry up and kill him!" Regir screamed, but the five men didn't move.

As I got closer, one of the Rank B men could no longer stand the fear and started swinging his sword. "Y-You damn brat!" I blocked his sword with my left Giganto arm. There was a high-pitched noise as the sword broke into pieces. The man froze in shock, so I flicked him on the forehead with the right Giganto arm, and with a *fwink!* the man went flying. Was he dead?

"Stop sending in the small fries! Bring your strongest man over!" I yelled.

"Stop being cocky!" The Rank A adventurer readied his sword.

"You're not the strongest. You! You, the one in the back! Yeah, the one with the hood over his face!" I pointed to a guy in the very back.

"Huh? I'm Rank B. Why do you think I'm the strongest when he's Rank A?"

"So what? I'm Rank C. Rank doesn't equal strength."

The man took off his hood. He was thin, with short hair and a sharp gaze.

"You're one of the guys who was following me yesterday. And the best of them too."

His eyes narrowed. "Oh, you noticed me? I didn't think you had a clue."

"The other guys made it too obvious, so I thought you were baiting me. I focused a bit harder and just happened to see you." I put it in a way that didn't make it obvious that I could use Detection magic.

"Pretty impressive."

"So? Aren't you going to attack me?" I asked.

"Not right now. If I attack you head-on, I won't be able to win no matter how hard I try."

“Aw, don’t be so humble!” I said, and he snorted with laughter.

“Why are you two bastards ignoring me?!” the Rank A adventurer howled, grabbing the hooded man by the shoulder.

“Shut up,” the hooded man replied, punching him so hard he fell backwards.

“Wh-What are you doing, you bastard?! Did you betray me?” Regir was freaking out, but the hooded man glared at him, then started walking off towards the spectator seats behind us.

“Now, should we get things started again?” I said, punching the three remaining Rank B men and knocking them out. It was pretty easy to catch them off guard, since they were stunned by the fact that the hooded man had betrayed them. Now the only person left was Regir. I pulled back the Giganto arms and snapped my fingers as I approached him.

“I-I’m a noble! Do you have any idea what’ll happen to you if you lay a finger on me?!” he screamed.

“Don’t worry. You won’t be a noble anymore once this duel is over,” I said.

“What are you talking about?!” he screamed, but I ignored him and delivered a straight punch to his face with my right fist. He flew four or five meters backwards and then landed.

“That’s it! Tenma is the winner!” the guildmaster declared.

Loud cheers could be heard from the audience. I pumped my right fist in the air, which just made everyone cheer louder.

“Splendid, just splendid!” the duke said as he appeared, clapping his hands. “Goodness, for a while there I wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but it was quite the overwhelming victory!” He smiled at me. Then, he turned towards the healer knights and said, “Go ahead.” At the duke’s signal, the knights began to use Recovery magic on Regir and his men. Finally, the duke turned towards the crowd. “Since Tenma is the victor, that proves his innocence. If anyone objects to this, come forward now.”

Even though he said those words quietly, it somehow resounded throughout the arena and the entire crowd went silent. But there was one person who couldn’t read the room.

“I won’t accept it! This duel means nothing! How can you even call it a duel when he relied on something like that?!”

It was Regir, yelling his head off. The crowd seemed fed up with him and didn’t respond. But he mistook their silence for interest and continued. “Not only did he use that dastardly tool in a duel, but he sent a spy into my guard! There’s no way that should be allowed! He should be asha—”

“Oh, will you be quiet already?!” the duke’s voice boomed, interrupting him. “*You’re* the one who should be ashamed of yourself!

Tenma made those arms himself, and he moved them with his own magical energy! You call yourself a noble, and yet you showed up to a *duel* with thirty henchmen and hid behind them the whole time! You have disgraced your title, and the punishment for that is very severe! Prepare yourself for the death penalty!” The duke gestured to the waiting knights. “Take him away! He is hereby stripped of his nobility!”

Regir screamed, “Please have mercy on me, Your Grace!” but the knights picked him up roughly on either side and dragged him out of the arena.

“I’m so sorry about all that,” the duke said to me, bowing his head. “One of our own acted shamefully in this duel...” That surprised the crowd more than it did me.

“Please raise your head, Your Grace. Regir’s the guilty one here. You have nothing to apologize for.” I continued the performance with him, speaking loud enough that the crowd could hear me.

“I appreciate that,” the duke said, lifting his head. He shook my hand, congratulating me.

As we shook, I whispered, “Do you think that was too much?”

“I think that was just enough for the audience to understand,” he answered with a grin. He looked like a child who’d just successfully pulled off a prank.

Part Eleven

After the duel, the duke, Primera, the guildmaster, and I all went to the knights' headquarters...along with one person who was sneaking behind us. We borrowed a conference room and started to discuss our plans moving forward.

"Well, let's begin. First, we need to wrap up the matter with Guise..." the duke began.

"Your Grace, before we get started—wasn't there someone you wanted to introduce to us?" I asked, glancing at the door.

"Ah, yes," said the duke. "Come in!" At this, the door quietly opened, revealing the hooded man we'd seen before.

Primera drew her sword. "What's Regir's man doing here?"

"He was never with Regir. He was with the duke from the very beginning," I said, holding her back.

Primera was quite surprised. "Huh?! What's going on, Father?!" she exclaimed.

"I think he was probably a spy sent by the duke."

"Yes, that's right," the duke admitted. "You're really something—I can't believe you figured all that out. But you're correct; he works for me as a spy."

The duke said all of this very casually, but having his cover blown so easily seemed to make the hooded man panic. "Your Grace! If you tell them that, how can I ever work as a spy again?!" And he had a good point.

"Don't worry. Tenma knew from the start. Primera's my daughter, and as for the guildmaster, he...well, he likes to avoid troublesome matters at all costs. Don't you?" He directed this question at the guildmaster, who nodded.

"Well, if you insist... But please don't ever do that again, Your Grace!" The hooded man then turned towards us. "Even though I appeared to be on Regir's side in the ring, I am on your side. I can't reveal my name, though."

"It's fine, Steel. Introduce yourself." Once again, the duke revealed the man's secrets to us.

"...I'm Steel. I work for the duke." As he reluctantly introduced himself, I went ahead and used Identify on him.

Name: Steel

Age: 29

Class: Human

Title: Spy, Assassin

HP: 17000
MP: 10000
Strength: B
Defense: B-
Agility: A
Magic: B-
Mind: A
Growth: C+
Luck: B-

He was pretty strong. It seemed more appropriate for him to be at Rank A than B. "I knew you were the strongest," I said.

He frowned. "Maybe...but if I were to fight you head-on, odds are I'd lose. Actually, I'd *definitely* lose."

"But you're confident you'd beat me if you snuck up on me?" I asked bluntly.

He didn't bat an eyelash. "I think it would help my chances." The way he behaved reminded me of a quote from a certain manga set in the Sengoku period: "Ninjas are the ultimate realists."

"Anyway, back to the main topic. As we talked about before, you'll sell your rights to Guise and the others to me, yes?"

"That's fine. And please proceed with the plans for Regir as we discussed before too."

After that, our meeting was pretty much over.

"What will happen to Guise and Regir now?"

"Guise's crimes will be fully evaluated. The lightest punishment would be that he gets sent to the mines. The worst would be death, of course. I'm almost certain Regir will get the death penalty. I'll arrange for him to be sent to the royal capital where he will face an inquisitor. That's only to see whether or not he's committed treason, though; I'll have the right to decide what to do with him. If he's found guilty of treason, his entire family will face the death penalty, but if not, then only he will die." He paused for a moment. "Even if there is some sort of interference and he somehow avoids the death penalty, he'll be stripped of his nobility and personal assets. Not only that, but I'm sure he'll be made a slave. The only person who can interfere with my judgment would be a member of the royal family or another duke, though," he said with a laugh.

"Now that that's settled, you'll give me the payment, right?" I asked.

The duke scratched his head. "Well, about that... He had a lot more hidden assets than I expected. It might take close to a year to calculate the value of everything and also to determine the extent of

his crimes. Can I give you part of the payment from his known assets and then pay the rest later when we've calculated what everything else is worth?" he suggested.

It wasn't like I was hard up for money, so I agreed. "That's fine with me. Please just let the guild know when you're finished. I check in with them regularly."

The duke went ahead and wrote up a new contract for us. As before, the parties concerned were me, the duke, and the guild. The contract stated that the agreement would still be upheld even if anything were to happen to the duke. Primera acted as our witness and added her signature.

"That's all for the contracts! All right, Tenma. Here is the 1,000,000G payment for Guise and the 1,500,000G payment from Regir's assets," said the duke, handing me a bag with 2,500,000G in it.

"You're awfully prepared. You must've been sure I would agree."

"A duke must always be prepared!" he answered, rather evasively. "Will you go on using Gunjo City as your home base?"

I considered this for a moment. "Actually, I've been thinking about leaving the city."

"Oh? Is there a reason why?"

"I've set a goal for myself—I want to challenge myself in the Elder Forest." This was a memory I didn't want to dredge up, but it was how I'd ended up here to begin with. "That forest has a special meaning to me. That's why I want to explore all of it."

"Ah... The forest where the Kukuri Village incident took place."

I tensed up at the mention of my village. And unfortunately, none of the three people with me were the type who'd miss such a thing. One of them was curious, another was suspicious, and the last one just seemed annoyed.

"Do you have a connection to that village?" the duke asked. *Damn it*, I thought.

"Yes. I had relatives who lived in Kukuri Village, and I heard they were all killed in the incident..." I said vaguely, trying to end the conversation.

"You didn't go in person to make sure?" the duke asked.

At that point, I came up with a story to try to make it believable. "No. I was only twelve at the time, and Kukuri Village was far away. My parents both passed away around then, so I was afraid to go see for myself that the relatives who'd loved me so much were also dead. I regret it now, of course," I said.

"Is that so...? Well, I suppose it couldn't be helped, then. Kukuri Village is still a ghost town, but I've heard that the few survivors have moved to either Russell City or the capital. If you get the chance, maybe you could go there and ask them about your relatives." The

duke seemed a bit skeptical of my explanation, but didn't press me any further. And for the first time, I thought maybe I should've let someone from the village know I was alive and having fun traveling.

It felt pretty awkward in the room now, so we decided to call it a day. On my way home, I stopped by the guild so I could cash in my bet.

"It's Tenma!"

"Yay, Tenma!"

"I knew you'd win, Tenma!"

"Congratulations, Tenma."

As soon as I went inside, the triplets and Flute appeared.

"Were you waiting for me?" I asked.

The triplets said they had been, but Flute said, "I returned to work right after the duel. And I received paid time off while I was on temporary leave!" She had a very satisfied look on her face. They must've given her a lot of money. She always seemed to think of everything, but that was probably why she was the vice-guildmaster. "By the way, Tenma—where is the guildmaster?" she asked, looking behind me.

"I realized he wasn't with me anymore, so I figured he went on ahead to the guild. He's not back yet?"

All of a sudden, it looked as though a wraith had appeared behind Flute. "Ha ha ha! That old goat's got some nerve! I'm gonna send him straight to hell once he gets back!"

And that was when a messenger from hell showed up at the guild. Rumor has it that around dinnertime that day, the screams of a man could be heard all over town, and they seemed to come from the guild. Even the knights were dispatched to investigate.

"U-Um, anyway... About my payment..." When I said these words, the wraith behind her finally disappeared—at least, for the moment.

"Oh, right. Please show me your betting ticket. Yes, everything seems to be in order. Please wait here a moment." She disappeared into a back room and then returned about ten minutes later with a bag filled with money. "Here are your winnings. It all came to 3,600,000G. Please check the amount." I looked inside and saw thirty-six large gold coins. "I apologize that we had to give it all to you in gold; we're short on platinum at the moment."

I didn't care either way, so I just shoved the gold into my magic bag like I always did and returned the empty bag to her.

The triplets had made 1,000,000G betting on the duel. There were a lot of adventurers who'd also bet on me, and so I had quite a lot of people coming up to thank me, but the ones who didn't like me or who had bet on Regir glared at me everywhere I went. No matter how old I became, I still had a hard time controlling my emotions, and that

was my own fault.

“Tenma! Let’s have dinner together tonight!”

“Yeah!”

“Your treat, of course!”

The triplets were getting a bit ahead of themselves, but since I’d made so much money today, I didn’t see the harm in it. I invited Flute too in order to thank her again. She agreed but also said that she would be a little late, so we decided to meet up at the Full Belly Inn after she got off work.

I had about four hours to kill until then, so we parted ways for the moment and I went back to the inn to make the reservation with Dozle. I found him in the kitchen prepping for dinner.



“Hey there, Tenma. I made a lot of money today thanks to you!” He was in a great mood. After I said what I was planning, he told me to leave it to him, and that he’d fix us up a special meal. I gave him some rockbird meat and eggs and asked him to make something with those.

I still had a lot of time to kill, so I decided to go to the library. Because I’d decided to leave Gunjo City soon, I chose to go to the library to look for a dungeon to challenge myself with.

The Gunjo City library was a three-story building. The reception desk was on the first floor, along with a shop where you could buy paper for note-taking. The second floor housed books to be read for pleasure, such as fictional tales and travelogues. The third floor had specialized books and academic texts. Most of the time I’d study the texts about magic on the third floor, but today I decided to visit the second floor.

In this world, books that were made of paper were very expensive, so the library didn’t lend out any of them. And if you destroyed or damaged them, you had to pay a hefty fine. Worst-case scenario, you could get thrown in jail.

So those who were enthusiastic about their studies would buy or bring in paper and transcribe the texts. If you couldn’t read, you could ask a staff member to read it out loud for you, but that cost 100G per half hour. A day pass to the library cost 200G, and you could get 100G of that refunded as long as you didn’t cause any trouble or damage during your stay.

I went upstairs to the second floor and had a librarian search for travelogues about dungeons. They wrote down the names of the cities or areas in which the dungeons were located, and then I went upstairs to the third floor for further research on each location to narrow down my choices. In the end, I was left with three candidates.

The first dungeon was about a hundred kilometers to the west of the city. It had been discovered thirty-five years ago and cleared two years later. It was twenty floors deep, which was considered to be on the smaller side.

The second was about three hundred kilometers to the northwest, and about two hundred kilometers from the royal capital. It was in a place called Dungeon City and had been discovered twenty years ago, but had yet to be cleared. It was said to be over one hundred floors deep, and the rooms were especially large.

The third choice was five hundred kilometers farther to the east than the first dungeon, had also been discovered in Dungeon City about thirty-two years ago, and cleared three years ago. It was forty-five floors deep and medium-sized.

As I compared the three of them, I opened up a book nearby called “My First Dungeon.”

Most dungeons were labyrinths, either aboveground or underground. But there were exceptions where magic had gone awry and warped the space, creating a dungeon entrance which led to another dimension. These places largely resembled dungeons near their entrances, but monsters couldn’t really survive in them, and they were also very difficult to get out of. In most cases, when you stumbled across one, you couldn’t even enter it. But there had been two discoveries of this rare type of dungeon, and thus far they had claimed the lives of over two hundred people, with only twenty surviving.

Underground labyrinths were just as the name suggested; they went as deep as the size of the dungeon’s core would allow. It was unclear how these dungeons ended up with so many floors, but at any rate, the cores were found on the deepest level of the dungeon. Even if you destroyed them or took them with you, however, another would eventually respawn in its place. In general, it was the act of destroying a dungeon’s core that counted as clearing the dungeon. The core itself could also be used as proof that you had done the deed.

A dungeon’s core was a collection of magical energy, and that amount of energy determined its size. The core lured monsters to it, absorbing magical energy from both them as well as adventurers who entered the dungeon. The closer to the core a monster came, the more it was influenced by the core, and the stronger it became. The strongest monster in the entire dungeon was called the dungeon’s boss. Each boss had its own territory and tended to stay in that area; it was rare for it to just go wandering off.

As for labyrinths, they were places such as dense woodlands and forests. Such dungeons did not have a core to destroy; instead, they were cleared by reaching the center of the labyrinth.

Dungeon City was known for being built around dungeons, and it had a lot of unique laws. According to the book, it was the perfect place for beginners because one could easily receive support or gather information.

That was the information I obtained from my reading. Taking all of that into consideration, I eliminated the first candidate from my list. Now it came down to the second and third dungeons. In that case, I thought maybe I should just go with the larger one, so the second candidate became my first choice and the third candidate became my second choice.

I went to check to see if there were any other good dungeons, but then realized the library would be closing soon. I put my books back and said goodbye to the librarian, then left.

I went back to the Full Belly Inn and played with Rocket and Shiromaru until it was time for dinner.

“Rocket, Shiromaru. I’m thinking about leaving this city soon. What do you think?” Of course, they didn’t answer me. But Rocket seemed to understand what I meant and stared at me, his body undulating as if he really wanted to speak. It felt like he was listening intently. Meanwhile, Shiromaru was sleeping on his back with his belly in the air.

It was almost dinnertime at that point, so I went down to the dining room, where Kanna led me to our reserved table. I took a seat and the triplets and Flute showed up a few minutes later. Apparently the girls had gone to the guild to get her and walked her here. Now that Kanna saw all of us had arrived, she brought out our food and drinks.

“Well, our food’s here, so let’s start eating!” I said. We all reached for our cups, which had alcohol in them, and made a toast.

“Thanks for the meal, Tenma!” the triplets chorused, immediately digging into their food afterwards.

“Thank you, Tenma,” Flute said, eating slowly and carefully to savor the taste of everything.

The first topic of conversation that came up was the duel, of course.

“So what ended up happening with Regir?” Milly asked. The other two seemed to be interested too, but Flute had already heard the story from the guildmaster, so she didn’t care.

“He’s going to be sent to the capital and have to face an inquisitor. Supposedly, he could be found guilty of treason. Either way, it seems almost certain he’ll get the death penalty. As for Guise, he’ll either be sentenced to death or made a slave.”

I felt like this conversation wasn’t very appropriate for mealtime, but the triplets just said “oh” and didn’t seem too bothered by it.

“Well, either way, thanks to all that, we now get to have this wonderful meal provided by Tenma. You’ll have to let me thank you.” Flute seemed to be very stubborn on that point.

After that, we just chatted about random things as we enjoyed our meal and drinks.

“Hey—why don’t we decide what our next mission should be? We’re not hard up for money or anything, but we shouldn’t take *too* much time off,” Lily said, out of the blue.

“True. Hopefully this time our mission won’t be too weird! Right, Tenma?”

“Are there any good missions available right now, Flute?” Nelly and Milly both piped up.

Flute got a thoughtful look on her face as she tried to think of

something.

At this point, I figured I should probably come clean with them. “There’s something I need to tell you all,” I said, in a tone so serious they all stopped eating. “To be honest, I’m going to be leaving Gunjo City soon.”

All four of them screamed, “Whaaaaaaaaaat?!” in unison.

“What?! What happened?!” Dozle, having heard the screams from where he was inside the kitchen, rushed out to see what had happened. The other customers all stopped eating and stared in our direction. “Tenma! Was it you making that commotion?!” He’d realized the noise was coming from this direction, and so came straight over to our table.

But the triplets beat him to the next question.

“What do you mean, you’re leaving?!”

“What happened, Tenma?!”

“Explain yourself!”

Dozle seemed to put two and two together. The other guests were used to there being commotions centered around me, so they collectively shrugged and returned to their meals.

“Is it because of Regir?” Flute asked. Unlike the triplets, she seemed calm.

“That’s not the only reason, but it’s one of them.” I began to tell them what had been on my mind lately. I told them what I’d told the duke, and also that I was getting nervous about fellow adventurers becoming jealous of me. Not only that, but a good chunk of the Gunjo City residents now held a grudge against me because of the duel—some had lost their bets and even gone into debt. Even though that wasn’t my fault, I didn’t feel good about it in the slightest.

After hearing my words, Flute apologized to me, since the guild had been at the center of all the betting. I told her not to worry about it because it was the citizens’ faults, not hers, but she seemed depressed anyway, possibly because she felt somewhat responsible for my departure.

“At any rate, I thought this would be a good time to leave.” I said this as cheerfully as I could, but the triplets weren’t having it.

“Then just live in our village and commute here!”

“Yeah, that’s a possibility!”

“Sounds like a plan!”

They all thought it was the best idea ever.

“No, he can’t.” Dozle was the one who spoke up. The triplets weren’t expecting that, and they weren’t really sure how to react. He looked at them. “Listen, girls. Not only are there adventurers who are afraid of Tenma after that duel, but some of the residents are too.”

I had no idea that was happening.

“Think about it. A kid who’s just fifteen defeated a band of adventurers, and even knocked a noble off his feet and had him stripped of his nobility.”

“Dozle, it was the duke who stripped the man of his title, not me.”

“It’s all the same to the people living here. You have secret ties to the duke, and are powerful enough to defeat a group of adventurers *and* a noble with no trouble whatsoever. You can see why that would be terrifying to someone who doesn’t have any power to speak of. They know that if they ever made an enemy out of you, it would mean certain death. They think of Tenma as a very dangerous adventurer.”

The triplets quieted down at this. Apparently Dozle had heard all of that through the grapevine working here at the inn.

“The reason he picked Dungeon City is because the people there are used to ruffians—isn’t that right? Tenma’s outgrown this place, especially when you consider everything that’s happened lately.” And now that he’d said his piece, Dozle went back into the kitchen.

“He’s right... We can’t keep Tenma here because of *our selfishness*,” Flute said, emphasizing the last few words for the triplets. However, they still didn’t seem to accept it.

“Then I’ll go with him!”

“Me too!”

“Me three!”

I couldn’t believe what they were saying. And before I could respond, Flute said, “But what about your family?”

The triplets were from a village about half a day’s walking distance from Gunjo City, and they had a lot of family. They had their parents, grandparents on both sides, a little brother, and five little sisters. And their grandparents hadn’t been in the best of health lately, so the triplets went home for about two weeks out of the month to help their family out. Their family relied on the triplets’ income for most of their living expenses, and because of that, they’d be in big trouble if that money just disappeared.

They’d told me about their family situation before, but Flute must’ve found out just from working with them so much. And she saw the girls as adventurers with a lot of potential, so the guild had never asked them to do any missions that would take a long time.

Hearing Flute’s reasoning, the triplets snapped back to reality and began to worry.

“Lilly, Nelly, Milly. Why are you hesitating? You should put your family first. Because, unlike me...you guys actually have one waiting for you.”

“Sorry we were selfish, Tenma.”

“You’re important to us, but our family’s important too...”

“Will you promise to come back and visit, though?”

At last, the three of them accepted the fact that I was leaving. It felt a little cowardly to bring up their family like that, but I knew that they would end up regretting leaving so impulsively.

“Of course. I’ll come back someday,” I promised. However, no one was in the mood to keep eating after that.

Just then, Dozle and Kanna appeared. “Today’s a day to celebrate, because Tenma’s decided to move forward! Come on, don’t stop drinking!”

“It’s at times like these when adventurers have to send their friends off with a smile! The rest of your drinks are on the house!”

They set four new cups on the table and brought over a keg of alcohol to fill them with.

“Hey! You all should congratulate Tenma too! A round of drinks, on the house! Let’s drink to Tenma!” Dozle called. Everyone gathered around the keg and offered me words of encouragement.

Once everyone had a drink in hand, Dozle led the toast and then cheers rang out. The triplets drank at a fast pace, while Flute snacked as she drank. More customers began putting in orders, so Dozle and Kanna got busier.

“Tenmaaaa, tee hee hee! There are so many Tenmas here!”

“I know... *Soooo* many Tenmas... I’m gonna take one home with me...”

“I’ll take this one... Hm? I can’t grab him! Get back here, Tenma!”

And now the triplets were completely drunk.

“Listen, you three!” Flute stood up and tried to stop them. “This one is *mine!*” She grabbed my arm, pulled me towards her, and held my face against her chest. The soft sensation made my heart race...or at least, it *should’ve*, but she reeked so badly of booze that I only turned my head away.

“Ahhh! Flute’s hogging all the Tenmas to herself!”

“No fair! No fair, Flute!”

“Wait, there are a bunch of Flutes here too! Why is that...?”

The triplets were way too drunk at this point, and were apparently seeing, well...triple of both me and Flute. Flute appeared to be sober, but she was actually quite drunk herself.

After that, the four of them fought over me for a while, and when the other customers saw what was going on, they began placing bets on who would catch me. The rowdy atmosphere continued in the Full Belly Inn well past midnight.

Most of the guests were passed out drunk by the time the sun came up. Although there were some who were sober enough to go home, most of the guests were sleeping on the tables. The triplets had passed out as well, and Kanna said, “I can’t let the girls sleep here with all these men around,” so we carried them up to an empty room

on the second floor. I tried to help her clean up downstairs, but she said she wouldn't let a guest do that, and ordered me to get some sleep.

Part Twelve

It was already way past noon when I woke up. I felt a little fatigued still as I trudged down to the first floor, where the triplets were already up and sitting at a table.

“Morning, everyone... Do you have the day off, Flute?” I asked, but there was no response. I thought that was strange, so I leaned over and whacked Milly on the shoulder since she was the one closest to me.

“*Myaah!* ...Ouch!” she shrieked, pressing a hand to her temple. I looked at the other three.

“My head is *pounding!*”

“I feel sick...”

“Oww... It hurts...”

“I drank way too much... Tenma... Good morning... *Burp...*”

The four of them had spectacular hangovers. I took a few special recovery potions from my bag and had them drink. Then I cast Recovery magic on them, which seemed to ease their symptoms.

“Seconds please, Dozle!”

“Me too, please!”

“An extra-large one for me!”

Er, slight correction—they appeared to be fully recovered, because they were all gobbling up Dozle’s rice gruel, which he made especially for people feeling under the weather (or who were hungover).

“I’ll just have some soup, Dozle.” Flute alone seemed to not have much of an appetite, and just sipped on some soup.

“Don’t you have to work today, Flute?”

“I took the day off, just in case. The guildmaster is taking my place today.” She told me taking one day off wouldn’t hurt, and had thus foisted all her work off onto the guildmaster.

“Oh... Well, I’m gonna leave now.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, all three of the triplets exclaimed with their own mouths full of gruel, “You’re leaving already, Tenma?!”

“No, I’m not leaving town yet. I want to go around and say goodbye to everyone first,” I explained.

“All right. See you later!” They went back to eating their gruel.

I walked out of the inn and headed towards the knights’ headquarters first. I asked to see Primera at the front desk but was told she was out patrolling at the moment, so I left a message and said I’d come back later.

Then I went to the Gunjo City Council’s main office. I asked for

Marks at the front desk. Luckily, he was free, so he came down right away. The moment he saw me, he bowed his head. "Thank you again so much for your help with Ceruna. What can I do for you today?"

"Well, I came to tell you goodbye because I'm going to be leaving the city soon."

Marks looked quite surprised. He lowered his voice. "I assume it's because of yesterday's duel?" he asked.

"That's part of the reason, but I've always been a traveler. So I thought this was a good time to resume my journey."

"I see... You know, my house is nearby and Ceruna's there right now. I'll go get her. Would you mind waiting here for a few minutes?" I agreed and he went dashing off to get her. He returned about ten minutes later, wheezing and panting so hard he couldn't even speak. Ceruna was out of breath too, and it took them both a few minutes to settle down.

"It's nice to see you again, Ceruna. How are you feeling?"

Ceruna was one of the women who had been kidnapped by Banza and his bandits, and treated extremely poorly. She had been in rough shape the last time I'd seen her, but she looked well today.

"Hello, Tenma. Thank you again for saving me. The recovery potions you gave me were very effective and I feel even better than I did before the incident," she said with a smile. But then her face turned serious. "Tenma... Would you consider taking me along with you on your journey? I want to repay you somehow...!"

"I'm sorry, Ceruna. But I can't take you with me," I said firmly. Marks looked shocked to hear Ceruna's request, but then relieved when I turned her down.

"But why? At least tell me why."

"Because you'll just get in the way. More importantly, I can't take someone along on a dangerous journey if they're not prepared for it. It would be risking your life." I looked back and forth between them. "And I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if anything happened to you."

"I suppose I've been rejected, then. That's a shame." It didn't really sound like she thought it was a shame, but I did feel bad for having to be so harsh with her.

"What will you do now, Tenma?" Marks asked. Honestly, I was so shocked by Ceruna's request that I'd forgotten he was even here.

"I'm going to challenge myself with a dungeon. I'm not sure what I'll do along the way, though."

"I see. The nearest dungeon is certainly a long way from Gunjo City."

"Yes, but Tenma can fly. So I'm sure he can get to the dungeon very quickly," Ceruna said, and she was right about that.

“Hey now, Ceruna—where’s the fun in that? Half the romance of a journey is the journey itself! If he flew there, that’d defeat the point!” When Marks pointed this out, I wanted to agree with him, but...

“I understand what you’re saying, Marks. But that’s not the only reason,” I told him. “Ceruna, I’m treating this journey as a kind of training. So I want to gain all kinds of experiences along the way. That’s why I’ll be taking a carriage.” As a man, I could understand Marks’s point, but that wasn’t my larger reason for traveling. I couldn’t say I wasn’t interested in the idea, though.

“Oh, I see... I thought your sole interest was the dungeon itself.”

“Well, anyway, like I said, I’m just going around saying goodbye to everyone before I leave.”

We chatted for about an hour after that, which was all Marks could spare because of his job, but we had fun nonetheless. I asked Ceruna how the other girls from her village were doing, and she told me they were all on the road to recovery. However, although their physical wounds were healing, they were still dealing with the emotional trauma from the incident. They would still burst into tears, petrified every time a man came near them, and there were some who had full-blown panic attacks. She said they’d just have to wait for time to heal those wounds.

I left the city hall and decided to go back to the knights’ headquarters again, so I bid farewell to Ceruna and Marks outside. Ceruna stood there until I disappeared from sight. Every time I turned back around we’d make eye contact, much to my embarrassment.

Once inside the knights’ headquarters, I asked for Primera again at the front desk and this time I was shown to her study.

“Hello, Tenma. I heard you’ve decided when you’ll be leaving the city?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m thinking about leaving in two to three days, so I’m saying my goodbyes.”

“I see. That was an awfully sudden decision.” Primera wasn’t surprised since she had heard about it all yesterday, along with her father the duke, but apparently she hadn’t expected me to leave so soon.

“Is the duke here?”

“No—he left yesterday. He said he wanted to take Regir to the capital right away.”

Although the duke was quite flighty and a bit of an airhead, it seemed he was quick to action when it mattered.

“I see. Well, the next time you see him, please give him my regards.”

“I will.”

We chatted for a little more after that, but suddenly the knight

commander and the other three captains burst into the room.

“Primera! We’re coming in!”

“What’s the matter, Commander? Captains?”

“Well, what do you think?! We heard Tenma is leaving, so we came to say goodbye to him!” Alan said.

“That’s right, Primera! He’s one of our biggest helpers for maintaining order in this city. Of course we’d come say goodbye,” Santos agreed.

“Actually, I feel like it’s a major problem that you didn’t notify us that he was leaving, after all he’s done for us,” Aida said, glaring at Primera.

“Now, now, just calm down. You know Primera can be scatterbrained sometimes.” Simon was attempting to stick up for her, but it came out sounding like an insult.

“Ahh! I’m so sorry! It totally slipped my mind!” But true to her scatterbrained nature, she neither noticed nor took offense. The men all laughed, but for some reason, Aida was toying with her weapon.

“Anyway, we got off-topic. Like we said, we’re here to say goodbye to Tenma,” Alan piped up, perhaps to distract Aida.

“I apologize. I should have been the one to come say goodbye to you first.”

“No need to be so formal! We’re not some hoity-toity people like the knights in the royal capital. Plus, we came here to ask you a favor.” Alan paused for a moment and then got on with it. He wanted me to have a match with all five knights simultaneously.

I agreed, but of course I claimed an overwhelming victory. Honestly, I think it was because none of them were seriously trying to beat me in the first place.

“Next, can we have one-on-one matches?” Alan asked, at which point we decided what order we’d be fighting in.

First up was Aida. She seemed to be a quick swordswoman and had a number of moves up her sleeve. “Let’s go.” At that signal, she raised thin fencing swords in both hands and came charging at me. I thrust my own sword towards her and she parried, then tried to circle around to my back, but I kicked her in the side to keep her in front of me. Trying to ward off my attack, she fell into a defensive stance, but she was too late.

I landed an upwards cut with my sword on her right side, knocking the sword from her right hand into the air. The impact must’ve disabled her hand, because she was unable to block my next attack and thus I defeated her.

“All right! It’s my turn!”

Next was Santos. He was armed with a large claymore and swung it around as he approached me. His fighting style seemed to be hard

whacks from close quarters. His attacks packed a punch, but since he swung his sword in such wide arcs, it was quite easy to evade them.

I charged into his space, but the moment I was about to attack, I realized that he was holding a broad-bladed knife that resembled a *nata* in his other hand. I had a feeling now that his claymore was just a diversionary secondary weapon and the knife was his primary weapon. That didn't deter me, though, and I continued charging him.

"Nngh!" I held back his left hand with my right, while I punched him in the gut with my other hand.

"Urgh!" He fell to his knees and dropped the claymore, trying to punch me with his right hand. I dodged it and his fist went plunging into the ground, marking his defeat.

Third up was Simon...and there was no other way to put it than to say our styles didn't match up at all. He liked to jab at his opponent as if he were fencing in an attempt to overwhelm them. He tried to alter his fighting style to take me on, but his attacks were just too light to contend with mine, and he lost easily.

Fourth was Alan.

"You're pretty strong. I don't think there's even anyone in the capital who could take you on. Who's your master?"

"My father and grandfather. But now I sort of have my own style." When I said "grandfather," I was counting both my grandpa and neighbors from my previous life, and Merlin. I felt comfortable enough with Alan to speak freely in this way. He was more powerful than anyone I had faced thus far.

"Let's do this!"

The moment he took a fighting stance, I felt his presence fade. To put it more aptly, I think he was forcefully suppressing his presence to make it harder for me to predict his movements. Therefore I decided to strike first. I charged towards him, but he easily evaded my attacks.

Next, he lunged towards me with a sharp counter. It was blow for blow after that, neither of us able to gain the upper hand to land the decisive blow. Alan leapt behind me to try to change things up, but I charged at him with all my might, thrusting my sword towards him. He lunged to the side to evade me, but I swung my sword right at him. "Not even close!" In other words, I was thrusting the flat of my sword towards him. That certainly surprised him, but he was still able to easily avoid it. Nevertheless, that momentary surprise created an in for me. I jabbed my sword at his throat.

"I win."

"That's a shame," he said, and shook my hand.

The rest of the captains applauded, and all of sudden a voice piped up. "Um... I haven't had my turn yet..." Primera raised her hand.

“Oh, I forgot about you!” everyone said in unison, knocking her off her feet. Somehow, she managed to stand back up and start the duel. Surprisingly, she could fight fairly well. I could tell she had a solid foundation, but struggled with putting it to practical use. It was actually pretty funny to watch her reaction when I threw a few fake-outs in here and there, because she kept falling for them over and over again.

“Stop teasing me!” she yelled several times throughout the duel, but it was her fault for falling for them in the first place. The duel was over all too soon, but I thought she put up a good fight once she finally stopped taking the bait.

“Tenma—I hate to keep asking you these favors, but could you train the other knights too? And there’s no need to hold back.” Having said this, Alan brought out several higher-ranking knights from each unit.

“It’s too much trouble to fight them individually. Can I just take them all on at once?”

“That’s fine. Don’t tell anyone, but it’s bad for the captains’ reputations for word to get around that they lost to a fifteen-year-old kid. Can you promise to keep it a secret from the others?” he whispered into my ear.

“Then why even do it in the first place?” I asked.

“Why, because it was a good opportunity for them to have a serious fight with someone outside of other knights!” He puffed out his chest.

“I understand... Sorry if I damaged their confidence at all.” I turned towards the other knights. “Come at me, all of you at once!” I yelled. And the result was that I beat them in about ten minutes. There were five knights from each unit for a total of twenty, and at first they surrounded me, but since five of them rushed me without strategizing at all (that was the fourth unit, of course), they lost their ability to fight me in a coordinated way. I finished them off one after the other with ease.

Once everyone was down, I went back over to Alan. They all looked frustrated, but the one who looked the most uncomfortable was Primera.

“Basically, we’re going to have to take a good look at everyone’s training from square one...especially the fourth brigade...” Alan muttered.

“I’m sorry...” Primera said in a barely audible voice. Later, I heard that the following day, Alan led a special, intense training program for the fourth brigade, which included Primera. Hopefully in a few years, the ragtag fourth brigade would become the sharpest knights in Gunjo City.

Primera glared at me, perhaps sensing my ridiculous thoughts. “Well, if you’ll excuse me,” I said, looking for a way to escape her gaze. I excused myself from the knights’ headquarters and dropped by the guild, but as usual the guildmaster was nowhere to be found, so I just went back home to the inn.

I headed into the dining room and for some reason Flute seemed to be rushing around in a panic.

“I’m back... What’s the matter, Flute?”

“Oh, Tenma! It’s the triplets!” She quickly brought me to the triplets’ room.

“Ughh, I feel sick!”

“I’m gonna throw up!”

“My stomach is turning!”

They were all lying down, their stomachs bloated.

“What in the world happened?” I asked Flute.

“They gorged themselves. They were so depressed they can’t come along with you that they drank and ate themselves silly the whole time you were gone.”

That meant the idiots had been eating for hours. I couldn’t believe I’d actually been worried about them.

“I’m sick!”

“I need medicine!”

“Go to the bathroom and throw up!” I told them. “That’s the best medicine!”

Finally, the three of them slowly, very slowly—turtles were probably faster—went to the bathroom. I wished I could’ve not thought about what happened next, but the sound of them [CENSORED] reached the dining room, where many customers were about to enjoy their dinner. Several of them ended up leaving without ordering.

Part Thirteen

Time for a pop quiz! After the girls were finished [CENSORED], what do you think happened to me?

- 1) I sat formally on my knees.
- 2) I sat formally on my knees while getting yelled at.
- 3) I sat formally on my knees while getting *really* yelled at.

Ding, ding, ding, ding, diiiiiiiiing!

The correct answer is 4! I was sitting formally on my knees along with the triplets, getting screamed at by Kanna! *Sigh*. Why did this have to happen, anyway? The entire problem was that, since the triplets [CENSORED] all at the same time, it was much louder than I'd expected it to be. At first, Kanna was just mad at the triplets, but then they said, "Tenma told us to!" and incriminated me along with them. Nor could I completely deny it, so I ended up facing Kanna's wrath as well.

"Tenma! This is a restaurant! What in the world did you do to them?!"

"No, Kanna, I didn't..."

"I don't want to hear any excuses!"

"Yes, ma'am! I'm sorry!"

She wouldn't even listen to an explanation.

"Aw, come on. Don't you think that's enough? They didn't mean any harm."

"You shut your mouth!"

"...Yes, ma'am." Thus Dozle valiantly tried to come to our rescue, but was defeated.

"I'm sorry, Kanna!"

"We didn't mean any harm!"

"We just wanted some relief!"

"It's all Tenma's fault! Forgive us!" the triplets chorused.

"Hang on, you three! I was trying to help *you*!"

"Well, it's your fault for telling us to do that!"

"Yeah! We only did what you said!"

"It's your fault for saying you're going to leave this city!"

"That has nothing to do with anything!"

At this point, it was looking like a comedy routine.

"Will you guys knock it off?!" Kanna's voice echoed throughout the entire town. Word had it that it was so loud, the fourth brigade of knights, who were patrolling, misinterpreted it as an imminent enemy

attack and went on high alert through the town for the rest of the night.

It was almost midnight when Kanna finally released us—without dinner, no less. I returned to my room, starving and extremely mentally exhausted. Shiromaru poked his head out of my bag and begged for food. But I was too tired, so I tried to ignore him and go to sleep.

“Awooo!” Groooowl!

“Aw-aw-awoooo!” Groooowl!

“Aw-aw-aw-awoooo!” Groooooowl!

Shiromaru’s whines and the sounds of his stomach growling combined into an otherworldly harmony.

“All right, already! Just hang on,” I said, digging through my bag for some food. “All I have is raw meat. You don’t mind, right?”

Shiromaru drooled at the sight of it, just like Pavlov’s dog (or wolf, I suppose). I tossed some rockbird and boar meat inside the bag and he gobbled it up ravenously.

“I guess I gotta think about storing up food for you too,” I murmured to myself just as he finished all the meat I’d given him. “That was fast. You should take your time and savor it more, you know...”

Now that Shiromaru’s belly was full, he woofed happily, then curled up and went right to sleep.

“All right. First order of business for the journey is getting enough food. Especially for Shiromaru...” I said as I lay down. Even though I should have been starving at this point, I wanted to sleep more than I wanted to eat. The moment my head hit the pillow, I fell into dreams.

After a while, I opened my eyes to the sight of a white space spread out before me. “Guess I’m still dreaming,” I said to myself. “I need to get back to sleep...” I knew it was a dream, but the scenery was so blank and boring that I closed my eyes anyway.

“Yahoo! Long time no see!” But all of a sudden, I heard a voice. I opened my eyes and rolled over. “It’s been fifteen years, but maybe you still remember? It’s me, the god of creation!”

The god who had brought me into this world appeared before my eyes.

“Long time no see. Good night.”

“Yes, goodni— Now wait just a minute! Wake up! Tenma!” The god grabbed me and forced me to sit up.

“What do you want now? I thought you weren’t supposed to get involved anymore after you reincarnated me.”

“Oh, that’s not true! Once every few years, we can connect with those we’ve reincarnated in a space of our creation, through your dreams. We can only do this with a limited number of people,

though.”

As he said that, I felt a chill down my spine and my body moved on its own accord.

“Tenmaaaaaa!”

It might’ve been the fastest I had ever moved. The moment I felt those chills I dashed forward, seizing the god of creation and whirling him into the position where I’d been standing. As a result, he was the one who received a passionate embrace from the very flirty god of war, complete with an attempt at a kiss...

“Hey! Creation, you idiot! I was trying to get Tenma!”

“That’s my line! Let me go, War! You pervert!”

They traded insults back and forth for a while, and then it escalated into a fistfight.

“Hey, Tenma! It’s been a while! I’ve been dying to see you again!” The god of skill appeared beside me.

“Hey, long time no see. So why am I here?” As I looked around, I realized this place looked awfully similar to where I’d met them the first time, when I’d been reincarnated.

“This isn’t where we first met, but think of it as somewhere similar! The reason we called you here is just for a bit of light questioning. It’s not a big deal! Just think of it as a little chat about life!”

“Okay... How many of you are here today?”

The god of skill began counting off on his fingers. “Those two, me, and the god of beasts so...four of us.”

“The god of beasts...? I don’t see him anywhere...”

Sniff, sniff, sniff...

“Whoa! You scared me!” The god of beasts appeared quite suddenly from behind, frantically sniffing me.

“...Long time no see.” *Sniff sniff*. I tried to get away from him, but he grabbed me and pulled me close to his nose with incredible strength. He didn’t seem to mean any harm, unlike the flirty god of war, so I just gave up and ignored him.

“So what did you want to ask me?”

“Nothing specific. We’ve observed most of what’s been going on.”

I frowned. “So then wasn’t bringing me here kind of pointless?”

“Nooo, das nah twue, Hemma...” The god of creation was speaking, but I couldn’t really understand what he was saying because his face was so swollen from getting punched repeatedly by the god of war—who, for his part, didn’t seem to have a scratch on him.

“I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Ohh, wight... Eyy!” His wounds began to heal in no time.

“Why didn’t you just do that in the first place?”

“Using magic in this space is exhausting,” the god of creation

laughed. Then a serious look came over his face, and he made this stunning announcement. "Actually, Tenma, at this rate the balance of your mental and physical abilities will be too off-kilter, and you'll eventually die."

"Huh?! What the hell are you talking about?"

Creation tried to calm me down. "That's only if we don't do something to prevent it."

"So there *is* something we can do, then?" I asked, feeling relieved.

"Yeah! You just have to use this!" He intoned some spooky words that sounded like the voices of my ancestors—"Tralala tralalalaaa, ooooooh!"—and then produced two bracelets from his pocket.

"What're those?"

"They're special bracelets that can suppress your powers. Now, I say 'suppress,' but they won't lower the current level of your skills. However, if you level up any more, your body physically won't be able to support your growth. So these bracelets will prevent that from happening. Not only will they lower the upper limit of your abilities, but they'll lighten the mental burden your powers place on you too. Let's say that in the future, you reach the point where you could defeat an ancient dragon with ease. Well, with the bracelets suppressing your power, instead you'll be at the point where you could *maybe* defeat an ancient dragon, if you tried *really* hard."

He said this in a tone of voice that reminded me of a certain cat robot from the future saying something like, "Understand, Nobita-kun?"

"Isn't being strong enough that defeating an ancient dragon is even a possibility pretty OP anyway?" I couldn't even imagine being powerful enough to defeat the strongest creature that existed in this world—not counting the gods, at least.

"Actually, when you were reincarnated, we gods went a little overboard...and we made the upper limit of your abilities higher than that of any human in recorded history. You've already surpassed where we thought you'd be at this point!"

They told me that normally, the highest rank one could achieve was somewhere between S- and S, and they had estimated my abilities at a minimum of S-...but right now, my minimum rank was actually SS.

"And that's why we made these bracelets. If you wear them, your powers will be capped at the very upper limits of what a human is capable of, even if you grow beyond the point you're at now," Creation said.

At this point, the god of beasts handed me three collars. "Here, take this too."

"What are they?"

“...Skill?”

“Sure, I’ll explain things for ya, Beasts. Tenma—the god of beasts made these for ya. If you put one of these collars on your followers, it’ll make ’em smaller. Whaddya think about that?” Both gods puffed their chests out proudly.

“That sounds pretty handy. How small can they get?”

“Well, it depends on how big each of them are. Let’s take Shiromaru for example. Right now he’s about three meters long, so it’d probably shrink him to about one to maybe one-and-a-half meters. But it won’t work on man-made life-forms like Valley Wind, or on humans either.”

“...Their power doesn’t change when they’re shrunk down, though. But their appetite does decrease...”

Wow, this would be even handier than I’d thought. If they’d stay just as strong, then I’d be able to take Shiromaru out even when we were in a dungeon. Plus, I wouldn’t have to feed him as much.

“Thanks, you two. I’ll put the collar on him as soon as I wake up!” They both looked pleased to hear it. “They’re so handy I wish I had four or even five of them, though...” Maybe I was being too greedy, but it was the truth.

“From time immemorial, the number of protectors has always been limited to three...”

“Tenma, I know that with your abilities, you can easily tame creatures if they’re compatible with you, but Beasts here won’t budge on the number three.”

I wondered if he was trying to make me collect monsters from land, sea, and air. Well, Shiromaru could easily run across land, but I wasn’t so sure Rocket fit the criteria for either of the other two...

“I guess he’s kind of made of water, so *maybe* he’d count as sea...?”

“What are you talking about?” the god of skill said, hearing my muttering. “You know, now that I think about it—Beasts might be hung up on the number three because he’s been obsessed with a manga about a kid who had three protectors...”

I had so much I wanted to say about that. Apparently, the obsession with Japanese subculture wasn’t limited to just foreigners from Earth, but affected gods from other worlds as well.

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,” said the god of creation, interrupting our conversation. “The bracelets I gave you have the same effect as your magic bag, so you can fit a lot of stuff in them! They were made by gods, after all! You won’t feel their weight when you equip them, and even if you lose them or your arms are cut off, they’ll always come back to you!”

It seemed he’d “forgotten” to tell me a very important piece of

information, and if what he said was correct, then I was now in the possession of a pair of incredibly powerful bracelets. Of course, I didn't want my arms to be cut off, but if I really wanted to regenerate them, I could. Then, if the bracelets always came back to me, I wouldn't have to worry about losing them and suffering any mental consequences.

"Are you sure I can have these?"

"Of course. We've given various items to other people we reincarnated in the past, like Namitaro."

I hadn't heard that name in a while, so we got to talking about the fish. We chatted so much that before I knew it, it was time for me to wake up.

"Well, see you later, Tenma. Next time we'll be able to see you sooner." Apparently, another perk of the bracelets was that they made it easier for me to see the gods. They also had the power to let me temporarily use my abilities to their fullest, but it would take about twenty to thirty years for me to reach that point.

I said goodbye to the gods of creation, skill, and beasts. Then I noticed that the god of war had been unnervingly quiet this whole time.

"Tenma, I'm not really supposed to be telling you this... But you have one family member who is still alive," he said.

It took me several moments to actually comprehend what he was saying. "Who is it? Who's alive? Tell me, god of war! Tell me who it is and where they are!"

"Calm down, Tenma! I'm sorry, but I can't give you any details! If I tell you anything else, bad things might begin to happen to them..."

He went on to explain exactly why. It seemed it was something like a curse of the gods, which was the opposite of the protection of the gods. The gods were forbidden from interfering with the lives of anyone they hadn't directly reincarnated. And if a god interfered too much in the life of one they *had* reincarnated, that excessive special treatment would begin to extend to the people that individual had relationships with too. Everyone who this had happened to had begun to suffer various detrimental mental effects, and most of them ended up dying. More than a thousand people had died because of this. And the god who had caused all of this had been stripped of their powers and destroyed.

I didn't know any of the details of that, but I guessed it was some kind of self-defense mechanism the world itself had to prevent the gods from becoming too powerful. Or else it was simply a bug in the system.

"So that's all I can tell you. I'm sorry."

"No—that's more than enough. I can take care of the rest by

myself. Luckily, I'm going to Dungeon City next, and that's near the capital. Adventurers from all over the continent go to that city, so it'll be easier for me to get information there."

I thanked the god of war and shook his hand.

"Oh! It looks like this is it. Until next time, Tenma!"

And suddenly everything went white.

Part Fourteen

“Morning already? Guess it was just a dream... Wait, it wasn’t!” Upon waking up, I discovered the two bracelets and three collars in bed with me. I got up, changed, and went out to the backyard so I could put the collar on Shiromaru.

“Awoo?”

Simply putting the collar on him didn’t make him any smaller, so I said, “Shrink!” Before I knew it, his body began to shrink until he was about one and a half meters long—about half the size he had been to begin with.

Next, I tried putting the bracelets on, but afterwards it didn’t feel like anything had changed. All of a sudden, my skin looked as though it were absorbing the bracelets, and before I knew it, they had disappeared. I was surprised and quickly patted my wrists, at which point they appeared again. I repeated this several times, and eventually realized that the bracelets blended into my skin and disappeared when I couldn’t use them, and that I could recall them at will. I also tried setting the bracelets down and walking away. Then I willed them to come back to me, and once again they appeared on my wrists.

I figured that it would look pretty suspicious if Shiromaru was suddenly much smaller, so I decided to wait to put his collar on until after we’d left the city. I told him to return to his normal size and he did. Just like him, the collar also grew and shrank to size. I’d expect nothing less from an item made by the gods.

After I finished playing with my new items, I spent the rest of the day preparing for my journey. Since I had my magic bag, I didn’t have to worry about food going bad, so I bought a bunch of it and put it inside. I thought that if I put the food directly into the bracelets it would look pretty suspicious, so I just put it all in my bag like I usually did, then transferred it to my bracelets. I kept doing that until both bags had food in them.

I went to several shops and bought water, ingredients, spices, and medicine. I also found an item at a vendor in a back alley that piqued my curiosity. At first glance it just looked like an ordinary dirty knife, but for some reason I felt drawn to it.

“Can I hold that?” I asked the vendor, a middle-aged man.

“You’ve got strange tastes, wanting to see an old thing like that! I’ll give ya a discount if you buy it, though!”

He had a *lot* of really high-quality stuff here, like an orichalcum knife, a mythrill dagger, an adamantium sword, adamantium muffers—

a type of armor which covers the top of the hand but leaves the palm unprotected, adamantium armor... Why the heck did he have such good stuff, anyway?! However, they all had a thin veneer of iron or copper on them which had rusted and made them look pretty beat up.

“How much for all of it?”

“You’re gonna buy all of this?! How about two gold coins...? No—one gold coin and five large silver coins?”

“Hmm, that’s fine. I think they’ll be pretty handy if I fix them up.” Acting like it was no big deal, I took the coins from my bag, then accepted the items from him and placed them in my bag.

“Oh, hey, you’ve got a magic bag? So that’s why you want such beat-up weapons. Have ’em repaired and they’ll be good as new! They might look rusty, but they’re all real sturdy!”

Even if I had to get them all repaired, they were worth several platinum coins, so I’d made out like a bandit with this deal. I wondered how the merchant got them in the first place, so I asked.

“I bought ’em off an adventurer. They said they got them in Dungeon City, but judging by the amount of rust on them, it seems like they were pilfered off bodies or something. Still, that adventurer said they needed money real bad, so I bought ’em for next to nothing. Now, I dunno if they really got ’em off bodies or not, but there are no returns!” He suddenly seemed to realize he’d probably given me too much information and panicked a little, but I told him that I wouldn’t need or request a return.

“Thanks for your business!” He had quite the grin on his face, but really, I should have been the one thanking him.

I went back to the inn and immediately started working at cleaning the rust off the knife and dagger. It was a simple process, really—I just rubbed the two of them against each other.

The knife was like a survival knife—the blade was about twenty centimeters long, and the handle about fifteen centimeters. The dagger was about the same length as a wakizashi. It looked like it was made in similar fashion to a Japanese sword. There was no scabbard and it was slightly curved. The blade was about forty centimeters long and the hilt twenty.

I rubbed the two against each other, flaking the rust off until the blades were completely clean. Next, I tackled the adamantium sword. It was a simply made greatsword. The blade was about a meter long, and the hilt fifty centimeters. It was quite large. I used the orichalcum to sand off the rust, which revealed a blackish blade underneath.

As for the muffers and the armor, it didn’t quite fit me yet, so I left them in my bag in storage where they would probably stay for the time being. I finished polishing up all the final details, and before I knew it, two hours had passed. It was starting to get dark outside, and

a yummy aroma drifted up from the dining room downstairs. I decided to conduct a certain experiment on Shiromaru, so I put his collar on and shrank him.

“Time for dinner, Shiromaru. Go ahead and eat.” I gave him the same amount of food I usually did, and at first he gobbled it up, but then he began slowing down about halfway through. He belched and then stopped eating, leaving about a third of the food. He seemed to be more full than usual, and in a bit of pain too. “All right! Now I don’t have to take as much food!”

I could cut down on food costs and not have to bring so much either. I inwardly struck a victory pose at the thought.

“All right—time for me to eat.” I gave Rocket his food and water and went down to the dining room. Once downstairs, I noticed that Kanna was in such a good mood it almost gave me goose bumps, while Dozle looked like he’d aged a decade.

“Tenma, is that you...? I’ve worked so hard...day...and night...”

I didn’t really care about the details, but handed him an energy drink nonetheless. “Sounds rough. Here, I made this.”

“Thanks, Tenma! *Gulp, gulp...* Hm? Hey, this goes down pretty easy!” Then Kanna snatched it away from him and drank it all in one go.

I’ll never forget the look on Dozle’s face... It was like he’d spotted an oasis in the middle of the desert and crawled towards it, only to find it was nothing more than a mirage... That was how devastated he looked. He looked as defeated as Tomorrow’s Joe when he’d turned to pure white ash.

“Just...hang in there, Dozle.” I put an energy drink in each of his hands, then stuffed four more in his pockets.

Then I took a seat and called out to Kanna as if nothing had happened. “I’ll have today’s special!”

“You got it! One special, comin’ right up!”

Dozle slowly lifted up the recovery potions and drank two in one go. “I’m on it,” he said, and disappeared into the kitchen. When the food came out, it tasted slightly salty.

“Hey, Kanna. I’ll be leaving tomorrow, so I just wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

Kanna looked shocked. “What? That’s awfully sudden!” She called Dozle over. “Come in here, dear!” Then she went outside to put a “Closed” sign on the door.

“What is it now?” Dozle still didn’t seem to be fully recovered yet as he slunk out of the kitchen. Once he heard what was up from Kanna, he exclaimed, “What?!” and then pitched forward, collapsing onto the floor.

“Dozleeeeeeeeeee!”

“Deeeaaaaaar!”

The customers around us all started freaking out. Since it was an emergency, they quickly evacuated while Kanna and I tended to Dozle. He came to about an hour later and seemed well enough.

“Ah! I had the strangest dream...!”

“Dear... It wasn’t a dream at all. Tenma is leaving the city tomorrow!”

“Are you for real?!” Dozle was so shocked that he was starting to experience a breakdown in his personality.

“I’m sorry, Dozle. But I just feel like I need to leave right away.” Obviously, I couldn’t tell him what the god of war had told me in my dream.

“I see... I guess adventurers have to trust their guts, so I can’t stop you.” Being a former adventurer himself, he seemed to accept that.

“I want to give you this to thank you for taking care of me these past two years,” I said, handing him a bundle of papers.

“No need, no need, this is a business, after all... Wait, are you for real?!”

“Can we really have this?!”

I’d given Dozle all the dessert recipes I knew and that I’d made successfully.

“But this is like a treasure! Are you sure about this?!”

There were actually pretty few dessert recipes in this world, because sugar was quite expensive, so most people thought of fruit as sweets. No one wanted to waste sugar if they didn’t know what to do with it—plus, if you mixed jam or dried fruit into cookies and just sprinkled sugar on top, that made it plenty good and sweet enough for most people.

The recipes I’d given him were the desserts I’d made before: donuts, pancakes, flan, and cream puffs. None of those were particularly difficult, and they were popular with adults and children alike.

“Please don’t worry. I still have some recipes I haven’t written down. The ones I’m giving you are those that will be easy for you to make in your kitchen, and that can be modified in many ways. Also, I got the duke of Sanga’s seal of approval.” I took a document out of my bag and at this, the two of them looked visibly relieved.

A long time ago, a chef at a restaurant in the royal capital had been executed by a noble because he’d sold dessert recipes without the explicit permission of that noble. Of course, the noble was later stripped of his title and made a criminal, but there were still chefs who became nervous when they got hold of rare recipes.

I’d brought this up to the duke last time we’d spoken, and he’d said, “Well, how about I write an official document giving my

permission? If anyone gives the cook any trouble, that'll be the same as picking a fight with me!"

I relayed what he'd said to them. "He had just one condition, though—every now and then the duke will send one of his servants here and he'd like first dibs on your desserts."

Not even the royal family could lay a hand on someone of Duke Sanga's stature, so a document from him was the greatest form of security you could ask for in this country. And if his only requirement was first dibs on the desserts that were created, it was a small price to pay.

"Well, that's a piece of cake!"

"Now I'll be able to eat delicious desserts every day!"

"Just don't eat too much, or you'll get sick like some other girls I know..."

Kanna froze for a moment. Then she said, "Now I'll be able to eat delicious desserts every once in a while! I do have to watch my figure, after all."

It seemed like women were concerned with that sort of thing, no matter what world they were from.

"Anyway," said Dozle, "I really appreciate this." He asked me questions about the recipes for the rest of the night and then I went to bed.

It was finally time for me to leave Gunjo City. There were clear, blue skies overhead—perfect weather for a journey. All my friends I'd made since I'd come here gathered around while I ate breakfast. There were the triplets, Dozle and Kanna, Flute and the guildmaster, Ceruna and Marks, and Primera and the other captains. They'd all come to see me off even though I was sure they had other things to do.

Since I'd already said my goodbyes to them, I kept it short and sweet today. They all wished me well and gave me little going-away presents, like food they'd made themselves, fruits and vegetables from their gardens, drinks, healing potions, and hand-drawn maps.

"Here, Tenma. Take this." Alan handed me a broken sword, spear, and armor. They were some of the items that had been beyond repair from the time we cleaned out the weapons room. "These are all difficult to repair, but knowing you, I'm sure you'll find some use for them."

He was right; I could definitely use them for alchemy. There were many uses for them, and I was grateful for the gift.



“Tenma, this is from my father.” Primera handed me an envelope sealed with wax. Inside was a medal shaped like a hexagon, with a crest of a pair of deer embossed on it, and a string strung through the top of the medal.

“Is this the duke’s crest?”

“Yes, that’s right. Carry this with you just in case, and it will come to your aid. He wanted me to give you that message, and apologize for any trouble. Please don’t hesitate to use it. But of course, he asks that you only use it for good.”

“Thank you so much. Of course, I won’t use it for ill purposes. Please make sure to tell him that.”

“I will. Take care, Tenma.”

I climbed into my carriage. “Everyone, thanks so much for everything. I promise I’ll come back to Gunjo City someday!”

I called out to Valley Wind, and it slowly began pulling my carriage. I turned around and waved at everyone until I couldn’t see them anymore. Then I turned around and urged Valley Wind to a trot, trying to push the sadness I felt out of my mind.

Epilogue: Gunjo City

(Dozle)

“Can’t believe it’s already been a week since Tenma left...”

Dozle had had guests stay with him long-term before, but never a minor child such as Tenma. The boy had just wandered into his inn two years ago and said—what was it again? Well, he couldn’t remember exactly, but he’d told Dozle he’d pay several months’ worth of lodging up front. At first, his regular customers thought Tenma might be the illegitimate child of some important noble or something because he’d paid with all that cash. But in actuality, he had simply defeated an unbelievable amount of monsters in a short time, and paid with a portion of his rewards. In Dozle’s eyes, that was even more amazing than being the illegitimate son of a noble.

Whether it was because they were plain rotten or just lazy, several adventurers had tried to swindle Tenma out of his money, but either way things hadn’t ended well with them. And thanks to Tenma, the city had become a much more peaceful place.

Still, he was an odd boy. Even though he was a child, he was a first-rate adventurer and a first-rate magician to boot. It gave Dozle chills to think what could’ve happened if Tenma used those powers for evil. But luckily, Tenma only turned against people who picked fights with him first. He’d heard rumors that Tenma had put over fifty adventurers out of business, but he had a feeling the real number was probably larger than that. Either way, the more idiots that were off the streets, the better.

“Are you done with prep yet, dear?”

“Almost!” *Uh-oh!* He’d gotten so lost in his thoughts that he forgot he was supposed to be prepping food. Today a servant of the duke was coming, so he had to make things even nicer than usual.

Several days later, thanks to Duke Sanga, word spread that the Full Belly Inn was selling delicious desserts—and not just in Gunjo City but all the way to the capital. Many nobles came from far and wide to buy the desserts, but since Dozle could only make a limited number each day, he put a limit on each individual purchase so that the nobles wouldn’t buy him out. Because of that, demand grew and the desserts became the Full Belly Inn’s flagship items.

Dozle decided to name the line of desserts after Tenma. When Tenma heard about this, he was incredibly embarrassed, and vowed to

go complain to Dozle in person someday.

(Guild)

“Flute, we’re in trouble! The number of monsters slain by adventurers this week has fallen by thirty percent!”

“Calm down! That’s only natural. Tenma left last week, after all.”

“Oh, right!” the panicked guild employee said, before going back to their seat.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been both highly unusual and even absurd that one young boy would make up thirty percent of the guild’s monster kills, but anytime someone said, “Tenma did it,” I accepted it unconditionally—in fact, I was somewhat numb to it by now.

“This isn’t good...” And yet, since I was numb to it, there was the danger of putting pressure on the regular adventurers to live up to Tenma’s high standards, which would be quite reckless. I decided to consult with the guildmaster about this matter.

“Excuse me, Guildmaster.” I went to his office and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. I went ahead and opened the door, but found the room empty. “I swear, that man...he must be slacking off again!” Even though this happened all the time, he always managed to have some excuse about why it was acceptable for him to not be present. Nevertheless, I’d be sure to make him work overtime whenever he returned.

I went back to work, still fuming over the guildmaster’s absence. Just then, I heard someone come in and when I looked over, I spotted the guildmaster slinking along behind another adventurer to hide. “Guildmaster!”

“Sorry, sorry! I just needed to go clear my mind!”

“What in the world do you even do that necessitates a trip to clear your mind?!” I yelled angrily, but then I realized he was holding a package from which a very enticing aroma was emanating. “What’s that?”

“Oh! Er, how about I share these with you and we can just overlook this whole matter?” he said, handing me something.

“Cream puffs from the Full Belly Inn?” They were the most popular dessert the inn sold lately.

“I pulled some strings and got a box of them! So just forgive me, all right?”

He had some nerve to think one piddling cream puff would be enough to buy me off!

“Thank you. I’ll accept them,” I said, taking the entire box of cream puffs from him. I turned towards the other employees and said

in a loud voice, “Everyone! The guildmaster brought us some dessert! There’s not much to go around, but he’ll buy more for those who didn’t get any next time!”

“H-Hey, I never said that!”

“Isn’t that right, Guildmaster?”

“No, I...”

“*Guildmaster...*”

“Yes, ma’am...”

I was so busy making sure he promised this publicly that I forgot all about the important conversation I needed to have with him...and ended up paying for it later.

(Wildcat Princesses)

“It went that way, Nelly!”

“Got it, Lily! Milly, back me up!”

“You got it!”

My sisters and I were out hunting rabbits in a field near town today. Well, I say “rabbits,” but of course they weren’t ordinary rabbits. They were monsters called horned rabbits—rabbitlike creatures with horns about ten centimeters long growing out of their heads. Their meat was edible and their horns could be used for medicine. But most of all, their furs were very popular with women. For that reason they were a popular hunting target for both newbie adventurers and seasoned veterans alike.

Guild members of ranks D and above could hunt them. Honestly they were weak enough monsters that Rank Es could handle them too. Being Rank C adventurers ourselves, they were perfect for us.

“Lily! Something weird’s going on—there are way too many of them!”

All of a sudden, there were thirty horned rabbits. Normally, these monsters were rarely seen in groups larger than ten unless it was mating season. They were very territorial, and if overpopulation ever struck, the parents would kill each other until their numbers had fallen again. Even if these were several different groups of rabbits who had come together for mating season, the strange thing was that there were no baby rabbits or pregnant females present.

Still, there might have been a lot of them, but they were just horned rabbits. If we just kept hacking away at them, we wouldn’t get hurt. We might get tired, but we weren’t in any danger.

Honestly, we didn’t really *need* to do this mission. We had a ton of cash left over from the spoils of defeating Banza and his bandits. Since Tenma had done all the heavy lifting in that mission, we thought he deserved all the money, but he insisted we take 3,000,000G. Actually,

he wanted to give us half the total amount, but we refused so he'd relented, eventually settling on that amount. Personally, we were afraid to walk around with that much cash in our pockets.

But now that we had the money, we'd started getting greedy. Well, I suppose it wasn't exactly *greed*—we were trying to raise enough money to send our younger siblings to a good school. Even if we couldn't afford a school in the capital, there were plenty of nice schools in larger cities than this one. But obviously, sending them away to a school like that cost a lot of money. There were only small schools in Gunjo City. We'd need enough money for tuition and board—and enough for five people too...

So that's why we were working! We'd decided to take missions that weren't too dangerous, but would have a nice payout of both food *and* money.

"You two recover the rabbits we've already killed and take them back to town," I told my sisters. But suddenly a huge horned rabbit at least a meter long appeared from the brush with a loud shriek. Taking that as their signal, another large group of horned rabbits who'd been hiding in the brush charged out and surrounded us.

"Whoa! What's with these things?"

"One rabbit is cute, but this many is terrifying!"

My sisters were just as startled as I was. Even though horned rabbits were small, being surrounded by forty of them would make any ordinary person scared—although until just last week, we'd spent a lot of time with someone who wasn't ordinary at all...

"What should we do, Lily?"

"Is it just me or does the big one look *really* confident?" Milly said. I looked towards the huge horned rabbit—well, let's just call him the boss. He was staring at us with an almost hateful smirk on his face.

"We'll have to defeat the boss!" And so the three of us launched chain attacks, which was our specialty.

The boss let out one last shriek and died.

"Huh. He was pretty weak despite his big attitude."

"That was definitely a false impression he gave us."

"I guess horned rabbits are still horned rabbits, no matter how big they are."

We'd built up the fight so much in our minds that the end result was quite surprising. Even the other horned rabbits who had answered the boss's call seemed surprised.

"Nelly, Milly! The other rabbits have stopped! This is our chance!" I said, and we mowed down the rest of the rabbits.

"Welcome back, Wildcat Princesses!" Back at the guild, Flute gave us a warm welcome. We'd gotten a lot closer to her recently.

"Thanks, Flute!" we answered in unison.

“Hm? Is it just me or do you look a lot more tired than usual?”

I gave Flute a look and then dumped out our magic bag in front of her. Tenma had given us the bag as a present before he left, and it was one of our greatest treasures. He’d said, “I made it myself so it wasn’t that expensive, but most of all it can only hold two hundred kilograms’ worth of stuff, so go ahead and take it.”

When we’d first got it, we didn’t really know much about magic bags, so we went ahead and accepted it without hesitation. We asked the guildmaster about it later and he told us, “That bag is worth at least 1,000,000G.” Unfortunately Tenma had already left town by then so we couldn’t return it, so we instead quickly had it registered in our names with someone who specialized in magical items. I thought that Tenma must be an incredibly eccentric person to give us something so valuable as if it were no big deal.

“Wh-What is all this?!” Flute exclaimed with surprise as the mountain of horned rabbits (already cleaned and gutted) tumbled out onto the floor.

“Hey, look at that! I knew that once you start working with Tenma, you never go back!”

“I think it’s pretty easy for them to find monsters now!”

“What?! I’m so jealous!”

I heard people watching from behind us chime in. We ignored them and explained the situation to Flute.

“I see... So a big horned rabbit was leading this many smaller ones...?” She looked a little doubtful, so I produced the body of the boss, at which point she finally believed us. “I’m going to get the guildmaster!” she said, and went running off to get the guildmaster.

The moment the guildmaster saw the boss’s body, he said, “That’s a king horned rabbit. Not many people know they exist. It’s a kind of spontaneous mutation.” He lifted up the king’s back foot and showed it to us. “They’re kings, but they’re weak. Most of the time, they’re eaten by other monsters or animals. Even though they’re weak, they’re extremely delicious.” Apparently he was finished with his explanation, because then he said, “I’ll leave the rest to you...” and started walking towards the entrance.

“Flute. Even though they’re just horned rabbits, two hundred was a bit much.” I knew that the guild hadn’t known this would be the case, but I still wanted to complain.

“We’re so sorry! This was a mistake on our part—we should’ve searched the area better. We just assumed that since they were horned rabbits, there wouldn’t be more than twenty of them.”

Luckily, this time we had only been dealing with horned rabbits, but what if it had been goblins or orcs? We could’ve died. That was how serious this mistake was.

“Anyway, please give us our payment. With hazard pay!”

“Okay. You know, Lily...you’ve grown more like Tenma recently.”

As we accepted our payment and then headed back to the inn, I wondered if that was true. We only kept the boss’s meat for ourselves. Lately, we’d been staying at the Full Belly Inn, which is the inn Tenma had used. The owners had kindly let us stay in his old room. Kanna had thoroughly cleaned the place before we moved in, though, so unfortunately it no longer smelled like Tenma...

Once we arrived at our room, the three of us settled in to discuss what had happened today. Lately we would have these discussions a lot, and it seemed to always end up with us coming to the same conclusion in unison: “It’s all Tenma’s fault!”

A few days later, we heard that there had been several other mix-ups at the guild like what had happened to us, so the guild members went out to investigate. They claimed they didn’t find anything unusual, so they continued to label those missions as easy. If only the boss monsters could’ve appeared then...

(Gunjo City Knights)

“You over there—look alive! Keep your arm up!”

The commander was really on our backs lately. Personally, as the fourth brigade’s captain, I was happy that we were getting all this special training, but at the same time, it made me feel incredibly embarrassed.

“Primera! Stop spacing out! Those two passed out—get ’em outta here!”

And the reason I was embarrassed was because of the woefully pathetic scene that was unfolding before my eyes. My unit was mostly made up of third sons and daughters of nobles, or lower. I wasn’t sure exactly why I had been put in charge of a unit made up of such fledglings, but lately I’d started to get the feeling that it was because I was just like them myself.

So I was trying my best during training, with the goal in mind of getting even one step closer to Tenma. He’d made a huge impact on me the first time we’d met. He looked like a child, but came across like a seasoned war hero. I suppose the best description I could come up with was that he was like a hero you’d read about in a fairy tale.

I was born the third daughter of a duke, so I probably had no chance of succeeding my father. Of course, I was still in the line of succession, but I had an older brother and two older sisters ahead of me, so I’d given up on that quite early on. I really wasn’t very interested in succeeding him anyway, so I would’ve been just fine giving up my rights completely. I just couldn’t do that formally until I

got married.

Thankfully, my father didn't seem too interested in placing me in a political marriage, so even when proposals from other nobles came he would turn them down and say, "I'm sorry, but Primera has decided to devote her life to being a knight." I heard this from my older brother. But anyway, since my father was turning down all offers of marriage for me, that meant I could never give up my rights of succession to his title. It's not like I was ever popular with men anyway, and I'd never even received *one* love letter. Still, the whole thing made me kind of sad.

Anyway, I digress. Being the daughter of a duke, I'd grown up seeing all kinds of incredibly talented people in various fields. As I was interested in combat and adventuring, I remembered them better than anyone. Tenma reminded me of them. In fact, he seemed even more talented than any of them.

When he'd sparred with me and my unit, I was so overwhelmed by his hostility in battle that I suddenly felt myself freezing up. It was so bad that I had to pat myself on the back for not just collapsing on the spot.

I'd always treated Tenma with such respect that my knights had begun to tease me, saying, "Just who's the older one *and* a noble here?" But I couldn't help it. Tenma was someone who had taken on an entire group of fighters hired by a noble and pulled off an overwhelming victory against them—ending up without a scratch. And none of the knights had come even close to beating him either.

While I had been lost in my reveries, my knights landed on the ground, one by one. The only ones left standing were the knights from the other unit who were here to train us.

"All right, that's enough for today. Everyone rest up and come back fresh again tomorrow!" the commander said before leaving the room.

"Are you okay, everyone?" I called to my unit.

"We're fine..." were their weak (and unconvincing) replies. The fourth brigade was used to being made fun of by the other knights, but lately people had started to reconsider their opinions of us after witnessing the intense training we were undergoing. Some even came forward to offer advice.

I was actually thinking it was a good thing that Tenma had beaten the tar out of our best knights. There were some in my unit who had previously been haughty and arrogant, mostly due to the fact that they were nobles, but lately I didn't see much of that behavior anymore.

If things kept going in this fashion, the fourth brigade would no longer be known as the spoiled stragglers. The day when they became

full-fledged knights might not have been too far away.

Hopefully none of them die in training before that happens... I took my gaze off my knights, who were sprawled out on the ground, and looked up at the sky, silently making that wish.

Extra Story: Primera's Worth

"Next, we'll spar three-on-three! You've got five seconds to form your groups!"

"Yes, Captain!" The knights answered my orders in unison. They had been sparring one-on-one, but now they formed groups of three with their comrades.

"Two, one... Time's up! Anyone who doesn't have a group, step forward!" Six men who were standing on the edges stepped forward. They stepped forward in three pairs, but unfortunately, as they were all standing too far apart from each other, there wasn't an immediately obvious way to split them up.

"You guys... All right, the two of you in the middle—split up. You, join the group on your left and you, join the group on your right. And all of you will be penalized. Go get suited up."

Hearing this, the six of them made faces but still ran to get the weights which were leaning up against the wall. The penalty I spoke of was sparring while wearing one-kilogram weights on both of their wrists and ankles. Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have been able to move with four kilograms of weights on them, but they were used to training with armor and I had gradually worked the penalty up to four kilograms. Still, it hadn't been easy.

When I'd first told them about the penalty, they all grumbled and complained but I'd forced them to wear it anyway. Anyone who refused at that point got even heavier weights. Further complaints bought them a trip to detention or forced labor.

Close to ten of my knights had quit over this, and I was quite worried for a while about the sudden loss in manpower of my brigade. The knights who quit went to the commander to complain and told him, "The captain is abusing her power as the duke's daughter!" Luckily, the commander paid no attention to them, and sent notices to their families to inform them of the *real* reason they'd quit the knights, which was: "Your son (or daughter) could not keep up with the training required of him (or her) by the knights, and thus resigned."

Objectively speaking, I realized that this penalty was quite harsh, but honestly it wasn't much different than the normal training the other brigades went through on a regular basis. In other words, the knights who'd quit were too accustomed to subpar training, and thus could not physically keep up with the normal amount of training. That

was why the commander had recognized that I was not at fault, and so hadn't entertained their complaints, instead allowing them to resign.

But I was guilty of one thing—and that was the fact that I hadn't trained the knights correctly in the first place. I'd turned a blind eye to how they'd been cutting corners from the beginning. So immediately after the knights had quit, I went to the commander with a letter of resignation, fully intending to quit myself and leave Gunjo City. But instead of accepting, the commander tore up my letter and tossed it in the garbage can. Then he walked over to me and punched my lights out.

I crashed into the desk, knocking over the chair from the impact. The other captains heard the commotion and pressed their ears to the door, then quickly burst in and tried to stop the commander. But instead of continuing to punch me, he calmly went back to his seat and straightened up the papers on his desk as if nothing had happened.

"If that's all, I'll decide how to deal with you later. Get back to work." He told me to leave, but I was so confused I stayed where I was on the floor, just staring at him in astonishment. The other captains were equally bewildered and were rooted to the spot.

"U-Um, is that all?"

"Hm? What—do you want me to punch you again? I can do it harder next time."

"N-No, Commander! Primera's just not thinking straight because of the impact!"

"That's right! She's scatterbrained enough as it is! If you punch her again, it'll just get worse!"

"We'd like to know what's going on. Please don't punch her again!"

I'd been trying to ask if it was okay for me to not quit, but apparently I'd asked in a way that invited misunderstandings because the commander had risen from his seat again with his fist brandished. Luckily, the other captains—Santos, Aida, and Simon—stopped him.

"Well, I suppose this involves you three as well, so I should tell you. Read the paper I ripped up in the trash can," the commander said, pointing to it. The three of them overturned the trash can and put the ripped pieces back together. Once they'd read what it said, they came over and silently knocked me upside the head in turn.

"But why...?" Luckily they hadn't hit me too hard, but they all looked extremely angry.

"No wonder the commander punched you! You should be grateful he only did it once!" Aida seemed to be the angriest of them all.

"That's right. I barely smacked you, but if I'd been the one to read that letter first, I'd have punched you even harder than him!" Santos

picked up the overturned chair and straightened everything up, not looking at me while he spoke. He was slamming things down, though, so I could tell he was angry.

"I thought you'd grown quite a bit, but it seems like you're still just as hasty as you ever were! Shall I explain, Commander?"

"Please."

After Simon received the commander's permission, he had everyone sit down. "First of all, it's true that Primera more or less bears the responsibility for the knights who quit, but the majority of the blame lies with their own behavior. In fact, we could look at this situation as her weeding out those who weren't cut out to be knights in the first place. That's a natural responsibility of a captain, and there's no problem with her doing that. Of course, since so many of them quit and they lodged complaints with the commander, she should suffer some repercussions as their direct superior, but that's really only a formality. Do you understand the story thus far?" He was speaking to me like I was a child. I was fairly surprised to hear it wasn't my fault, but I knew if I brought up my doubts the conversation wouldn't progress, so I just pretended to understand.

"Is that so? Fine, then. The biggest problem here is that they quit through *no fault of Primera's*. If we made her quit following this, the fourth brigade would begin to fall apart entirely. I'll be blunt because of the circumstances, but the fourth brigade was formed *because* you joined the knights, Primera. Ah! Please don't get the wrong idea... It's not because you're the duke's daughter."

I glared at Simon because at first I thought he meant the only reason I'd gotten this job was because of my father, but he quickly cleared that up. Under normal circumstances I'd have thought it was just a coincidence, but Simon looked so serious I decided not to butt in and just hear him out.

"I know I said the reason wasn't because you're the duke's daughter, but it *is* true that the knights wanted his influence present among our ranks, partly to keep the knights who are of noble blood in check. Although we are all of noble birth, including the commander, there are those of lower status, and sometimes those knights have resented us. Now those knights were usually the ones who had no special talents and had nothing to boast of besides their station in life—pathetic fools. Still, it's dangerous to have too many of those like-minded individuals in one place. And that's when you joined up with us, Primera. At first, we intended on making you a vice-commander in name only, someone who would work closely with the commander in order to utilize your family's influence...but then we realized you had a wonderful personality and were a very talented knight, so we skipped you up several ranks, promoting you to captain. Of course, if

we'd found out you didn't have what it takes to be a captain, we'd have someone else we trusted take over the job and give you the vice-commander position."

I had no idea any of this had happened behind the scenes, so I was a bit confused. It was hard to keep up with.

"Basically, we recognized your future potential and put you in charge of the newly created fourth brigade. Long story short, you earned your position based on merit."

"R-Really?" I asked in disbelief. I still didn't really get it, but all of them nodded emphatically.

"And we can see the value in your current training as well. If the knights don't want to be penalized, then they need to understand what's expected of them and train themselves until they're capable of it. And you've grown too, Primera. You used to go around town with a scowl on your face, but now you've grown softer around the edges to the point where children approach you with a smile." The corners of Santos's mouth rose. I honestly didn't think I had changed that much, but everyone else agreed, so I could hardly object.

"Santos might be exaggerating slightly, but he's basically right. Lots of children will burst into tears upon seeing an armed knight patrolling with a scary look on their face, woman or not. The fact that they're approaching you now is proof of how much you've grown."

"That's right. A knight must be strong, but they should also not be feared by their own citizens. Plus, strength in battle isn't the only kind of strength. Having the love and trust of the citizens is the greatest strength there is. Even though you seem oblivious to it, getting to that point in such a short amount of time is more difficult than commanding a brigade of knights. It would be a great loss to us all if such a person quit. Both for our reputation and strength in battle," Aida explained.

The "strength in battle" part made sense, but I wasn't sure about the reputation aspect of it. I'd thought the only reason I'd had more attention on me lately was because I'd spent so much time with Tenma, and people had begun to talk about me being the daughter of the duke more. But if I quit now, then there would be many people who would get the wrong idea and think it was the knights who'd made me quit because of this.

"So that's why we can't let you quit over something so trifling. And we can't treat you the same way we treated the ones who quit either. They weren't cut out for this work, and will probably never amount to much, doomed to spend the rest of their lives looked down upon by both their family and others. Now you, on the other hand, have real talent and are working hard to improve yourself. You're way more valuable than they are."

It might have sounded harsh to say this, but in this world, people were not equal. Some might have been under the delusion that we were, but that was nothing more than idealism. I'd received a noble's education, so even I understood that much.

"If you understand, then you can go ahead and leave. You should go put some ice on your cheek, just in case," the commander said, dismissing me.

As I walked back to my room, I wondered how I could possibly live up to his and the other captains' expectations of me, but I couldn't come up with a good solution. There was one decision I did make, though. "I'll just have to work hard enough to make up for the ones who quit. And the best way to do that is to train my knights up."

Even if I worked as hard as I could, the most I could do was cover for two or three people, so my knights would have to do the rest. I felt guilty about increasing their workload, but the ones who remained were all knights who were working hard amidst the tough training...so I figured they could probably manage working a little bit harder.

I wasn't super confident yet, so I decided to ask the other captains for their advice later.

And that brought us back to the present. At first some of the knights were unsure about the changes in my training, but most of them had adjusted to it now. In fact, I felt like most of them had grown a lot because of it. Specifically, they had more strength and stamina than they'd had a few months ago. Recently I'd been told to hold off on training with Aida and focus on the knights' strength training, so I felt like I'd gained a little weight around my hips, but still...

I thought that right now, the fourth brigade could probably hold their own against Banza and his lot, but it made me a bit sad to admit that I couldn't definitively say they would win. Nevertheless, we couldn't make progress unless we took a hard look at reality. More knights began to think that way, and their secret chant was, "Overthrow Tenma!" but of course not even one of them actually thought they'd ever be able to beat him.

Occasionally the other knights would still tease them, but I thought it was best to set the bar high for them—plus, it wasn't bullying or anything. Rather, it motivated them to keep working hard, so the atmosphere within the knights' brigades wasn't bad at all.

Still, I kept secretly holding onto the hope that someday we'd grow strong enough to give Tenma a run for his money.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading volume two of *Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World*. This book was published largely because of your support. Honestly, I was prepared for the series to end after volume one, so when my editor told me, “It’s selling well” and “We’re going to do a reprint,” I blurted out, “For real?!”

This story started out as a web novel, so some parts were revised and other parts had things added onto them. Tenma grew a lot, both physically and emotionally, during the three years since the first volume, experiencing many new things he hadn’t been able to in Kukuri Village. Because of that, he’s grown more accustomed to this world and grown more merciless towards his enemies. He views anyone who attacks him and his friends as nothing more than a monster.

Most of the characters who appeared in the first volume are not in this one, and instead were replaced with several new heroines, including the triplets, Primera, and Flute. It’s unclear how each of their relationships with Tenma will grow in the future, but they appear in future chapters, and I intend on having them all appear in future volumes as well. I’d tell you to read the web novel for more details, but I’m hoping those get published as hard copies too.

Their stories continue in volumes three and four, so I’d like to explain what’s happened since volume two in the web novel.

(Editor’s note: Spoilers ahead, please read with discretion.)

Chapter Three: The setting switches to Dungeon City, where several new characters, such as Tenma’s apprentice, various high-ranking adventurers, and Tenma’s slave appears!

Chapter Four: While Tenma is on his way to the royal capital, he runs into a *certain someone*! He meets many other people and reunites with others as well.

Chapter Five: Tenma enters a fighting competition in the capital! But Tenma’s the only human taking part...? Several characters from Tenma’s hometown appear in this chapter...maybe even his relatives?

Chapter Six: Now that Tenma is done with the competition, he’s gained a stalker—a male one, at that! Tenma is kept busy by slaying

his second dragon and stopping a coup d'état. The chapter ends with a relaxing camping trip.

Chapter Seven: Tenma is still in the capital and has nothing else to do, so he decides to sit in on some classes at the academy. But his stalker ends up being his campus guide...and his stalker's chaperone is *that certain someone*! On top of that, for some reason, a Tenma gang is created, with *someone* being one of its members!

Chapter Eight: Tenma goes back to Dungeon City. He takes on what he thinks is a simple mission, but Valley Wind is nearly destroyed in the course of it! He descends into a dungeon to gather materials in hopes of repairing Valley Wind, but the boss sinks his teeth into Tenma! After that, he has a fateful encounter with *a certain character*!

That's basically what happens. There's a possibility that some of these details will change before publication, but the gist of it will remain the same. As I write this afterword, I'm working on Chapter Eight. As of September 2017, I'm almost finished with it. I'll probably be on the next chapter by the time this volume gets published.

Finally, I'd like to thank Nemu for continuing to illustrate the books, the editors at Mag Garden, everyone who's read the web novel, and everyone who bought this book. I'll continue doing my best writing this story, so please continue to support me.

- Kenichi



Shiromaru

Rocket

Tenma (Our hero)

Primera von Sanga

Alsace von Sanga

ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD

2



Max Bellcap

Flute

Nelly

Milly

Lily

Bonus Short Story

Flute's Mission

"Thank you all for coming." I had called the Wildcat Princesses to a café near the guild in order to discuss something I'd had on my mind for quite some time. The triplets seemed nervous, wondering what I wanted to talk about. They weren't in trouble or anything—I just wanted them to listen to a mission I had in mind for them. They visibly relaxed when I told them that, although they seemed confused as to why I had invited them to a café instead of the guild.

"I can tell you're wondering why I asked you to come here and not the guild, but there's a reason for that." Yes, it was a very important mission that needed to be kept a secret from the other guild members. And for that, I needed adventurers whom I had a close relationship with—ones I could trust to keep my secret.

The color drained from their faces; I had a feeling they'd gotten the wrong idea. But since they were still at the table, it seemed like they were willing to at least hear me out.

"I need you to keep this a secret from other guild members no matter what. Oh! And there's something else I need to say first. I won't hold it against you if you turn down this mission. Although I'll still ask that you not mention it to anyone." I gave them a joking smile, and for some reason they turned even paler and began trembling. I wondered if they were feeling under the weather. Perhaps I should order them warm drinks to thank them for coming all this way.

"Anyway, now for the important part—the mission itself. I need to get my hands on a *certain item* regularly. It might be a bit difficult to obtain, but that's why I chose you three; I know you can do it! Since this is a personal mission, the pay might be a bit low, but would you please consider taking it on anyway?" I gave them my most winning smile, the one that always seemed to please the men (at least I thought it did, anyway). I wasn't sure it would work as well on women, but a smile was always better than a poker face, so I gave it a try regardless. Luckily it seemed to work, because the three of them began nodding emphatically.

"Wonderful! Now for the details..."

A few days passed after the Wildcat Princesses accepted my mission.

“Everyone, may I please have your attention?” The usually lazy guildmaster looked very serious, which was quite unlike him. We all wondered what was going on. Was he going to finally retire?

“I’ve heard that some adventurers have been buying up all the desserts at the Full Belly Inn, which is causing the inn problems. When I asked for details, I discovered that the adventurers had been tasked by someone else to buy the desserts. Not only that, but it was a *personal mission*. When I call your name, please come to my office so we can discuss this matter.”

I had a very bad feeling about this. In fact, I was certain I was right since my name was the first one called.

“Everyone else, I want you to inform any adventurers—especially those of lower ranks—that they are forbidden from taking on missions regarding buying up desserts. And if you buy desserts for yourself, please exercise restraint and good manners.” The guildmaster addressed this statement to those whose names hadn’t been called. Then he beckoned me and several other girls who worked at the front desk into his office. And that’s when I discovered my hunch had been right. Although I hadn’t expected other guild members had been asking adventurers to do the same thing for them...

After that day, adventurers stopped buying up all the desserts at the Full Belly Inn.

“What’s wrong with sending adventurers to go buy up desserts anyway, Guildmaster?”

“It’s a problem because the Full Belly Inn is currently sponsored by the duke and his family!”

“I’m so sorry!” I got on my hands and knees and apologized. It was quite humiliating to do this in front of the guildmaster of all people, but I didn’t want the duke to turn against the adventurers’ guild. That would be absolutely terrible. Worst-case scenario, I could get the death penalty for it! Well, perhaps that was an exaggeration, but at the very least I would be banished from Sanga duchy.

At any rate, I decided to keep begging for the guildmaster’s forgiveness, along with the girls from the front desk.



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 2
by Kenichi

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Edited by Momo

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